

Black Literary Suite

The Black Literary Suite is a three-part series that uses practices associated with quantitative research in order to enhance understandings of black literary history. This exhibit is an extension of the Project on the History of Black Writing (HBW) and utilizes 100 novels from the program's broad collection of over 900+ novels written by African Americans dating as far back to William Wells Brown's *Clotel: or, The President's Daughter*, published in 1853. Over four dozens, wide ranging factors such as publication dates and publisher regions, author education and author main residences, novel time-period and sex of protagonist were indentified in order to present a more comprehensive portrait of African American literature and spur new areas of inquiry. The ultimate goals of this project are to analyze the HBW's entire collection using empirical data in order to shift scholarly discourses on African American literature from examinations of two or three novels at a time to a more expansive view of hundreds of black novels.

HBW

The Project on the History of Black Writing

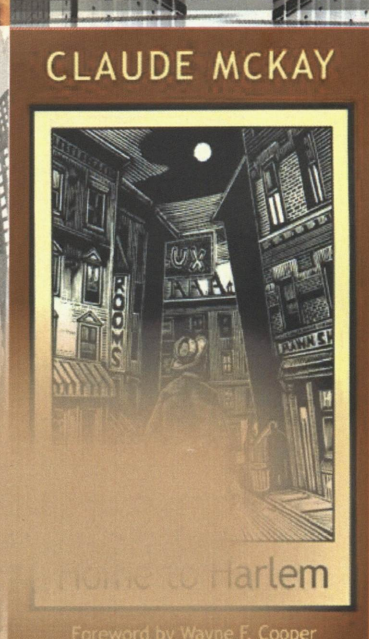
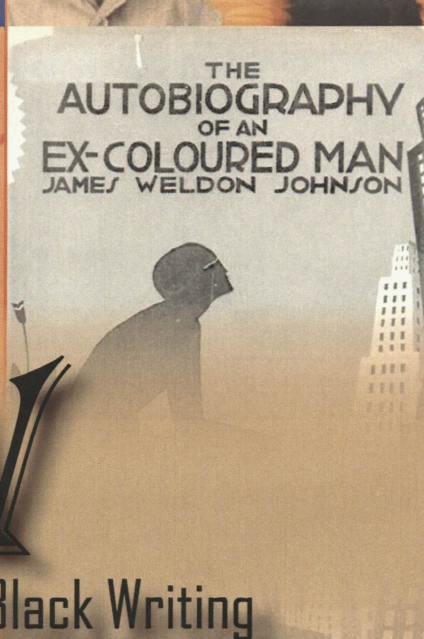
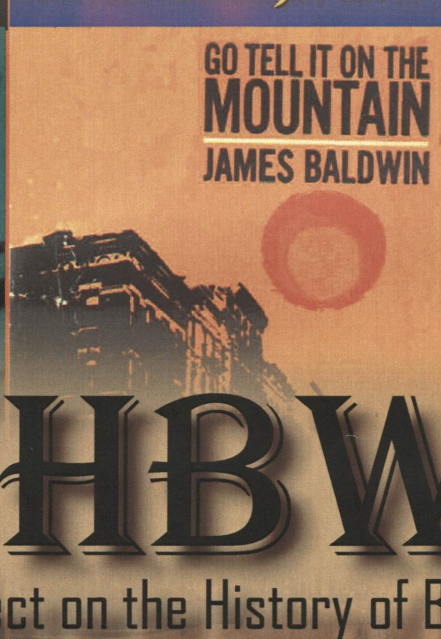
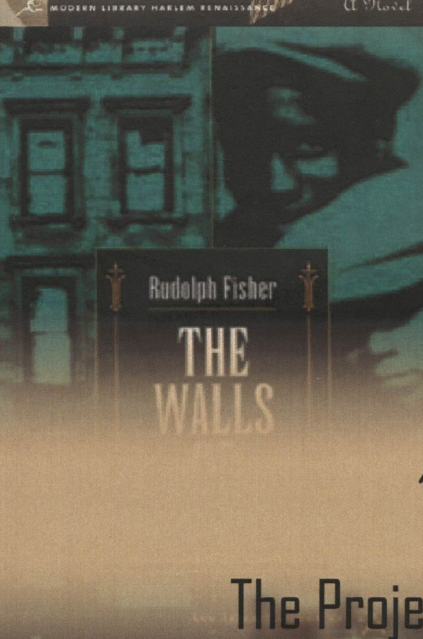
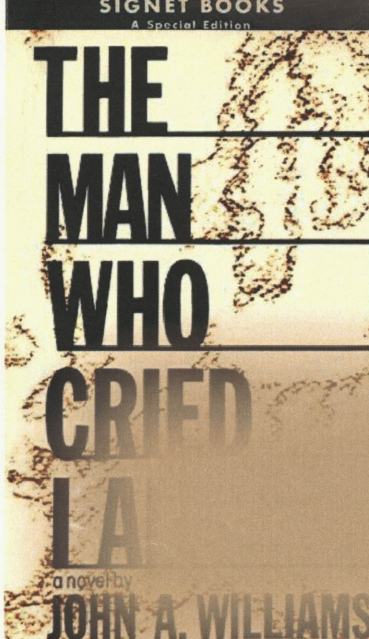
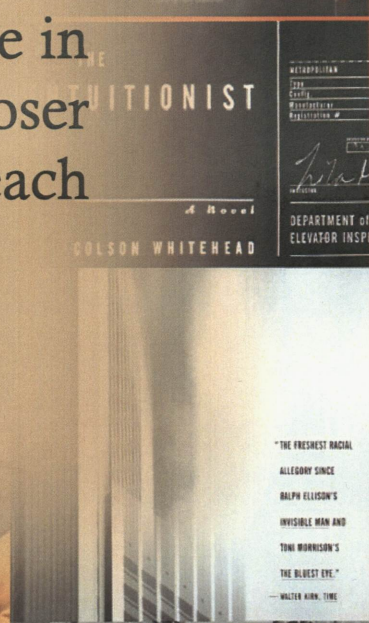
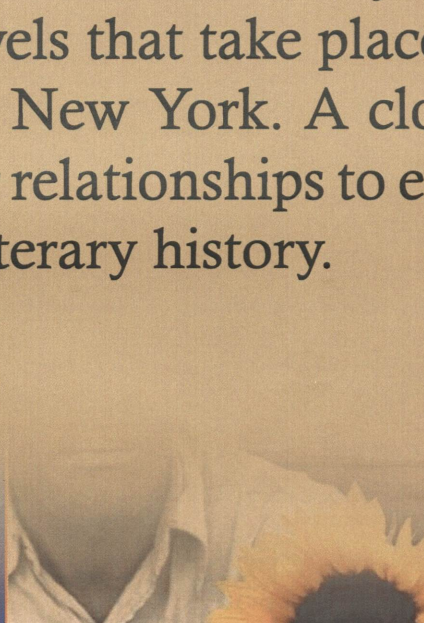
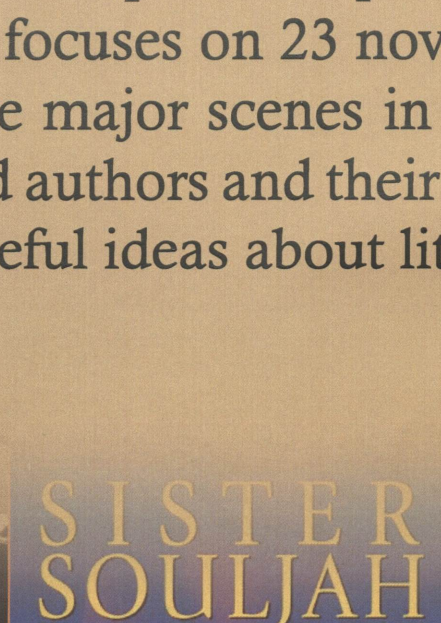
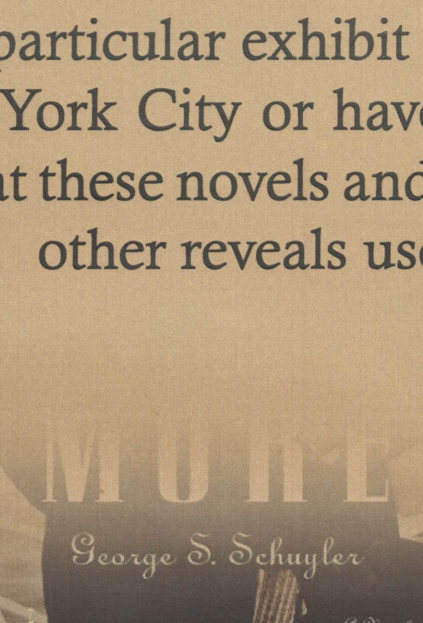
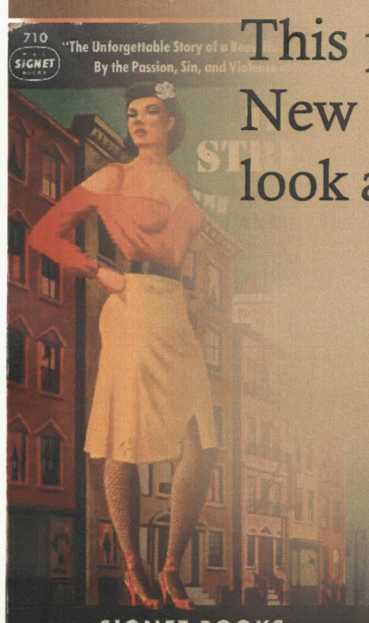
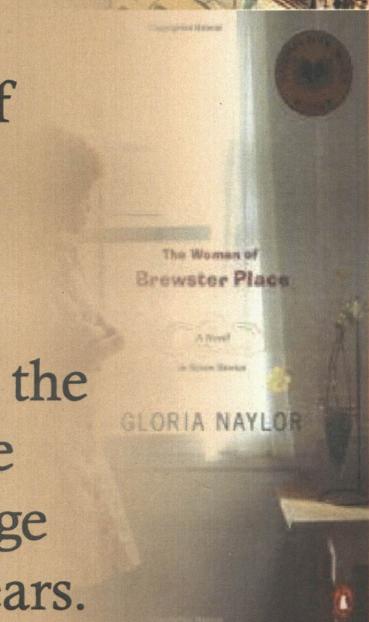
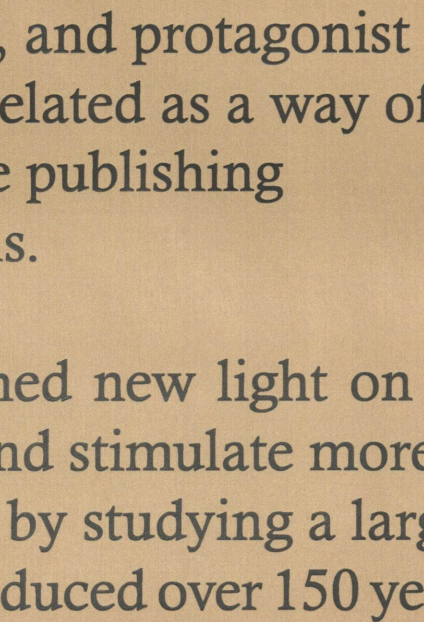
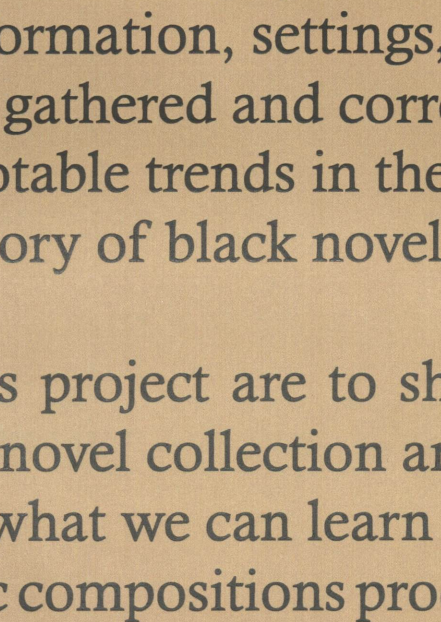
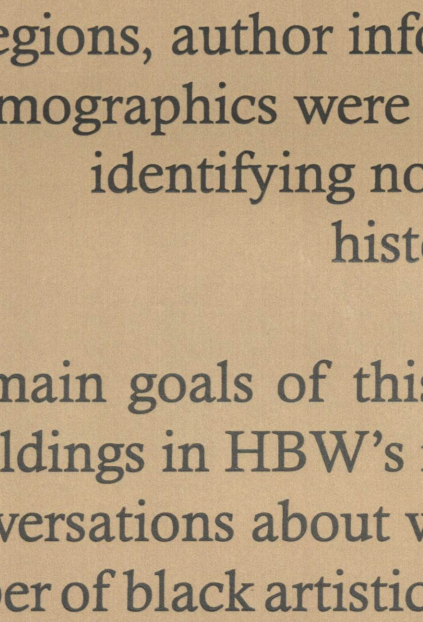
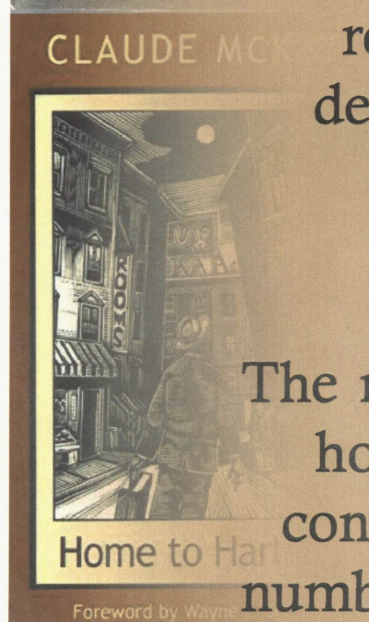
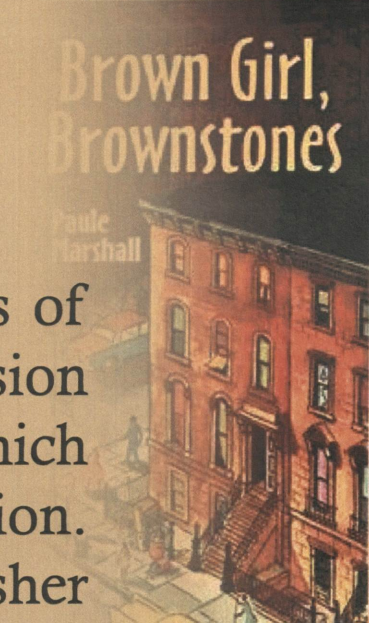
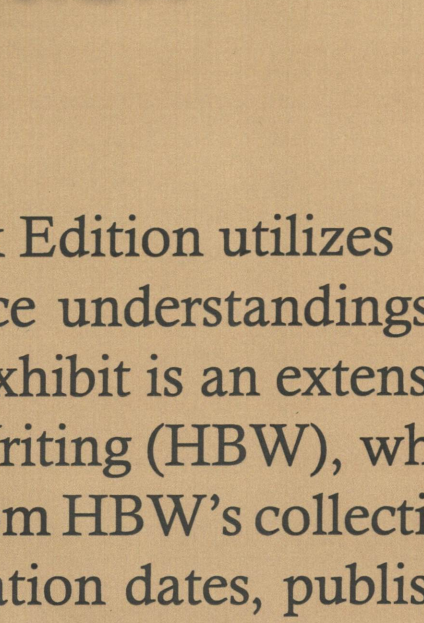
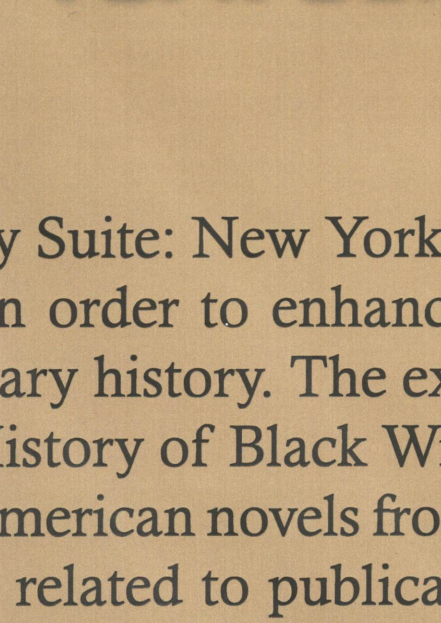
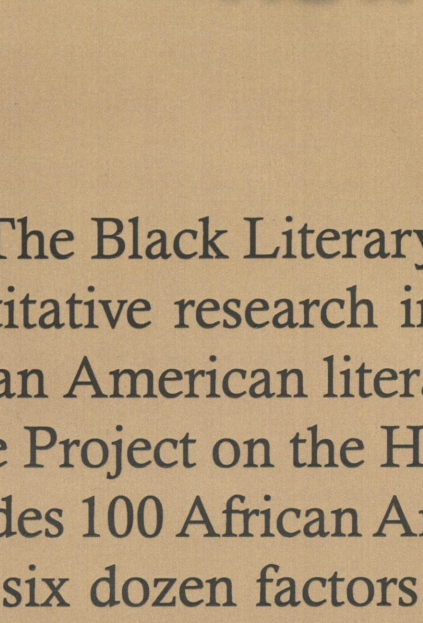
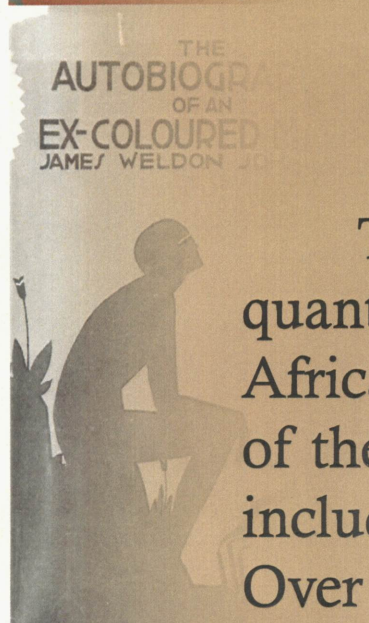
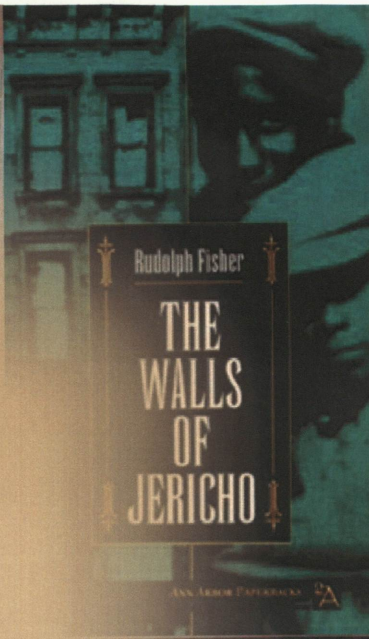
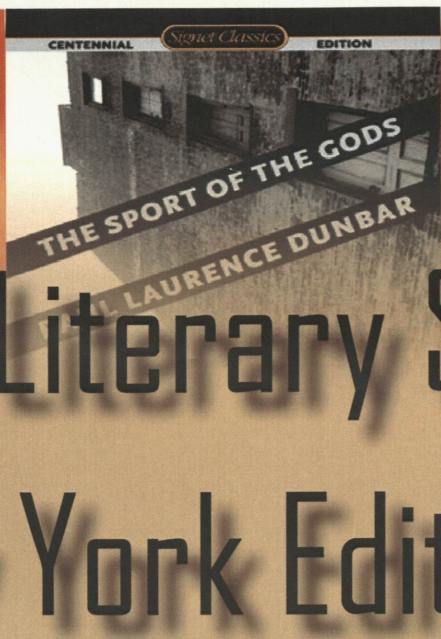
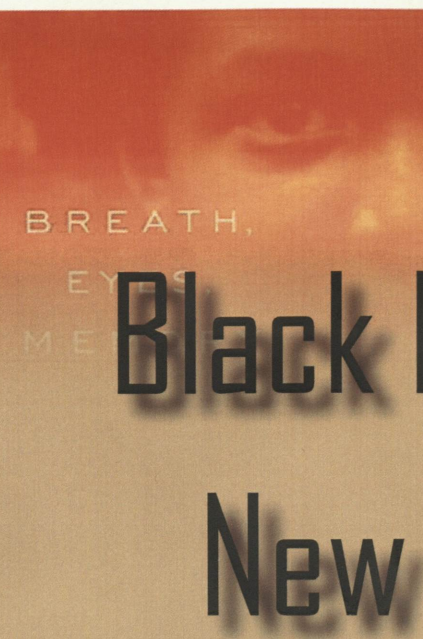
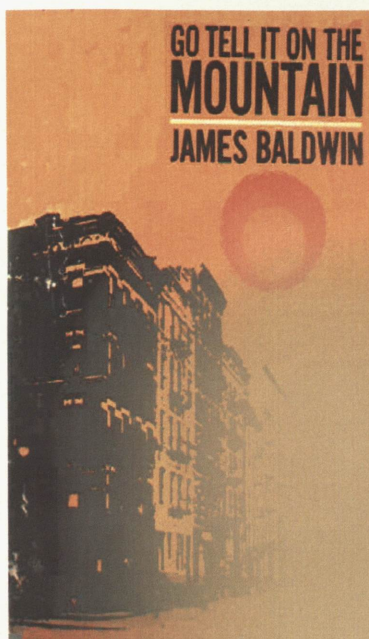
Black Literary Suite: New York Edition

The Black Literary Suite: New York Edition utilizes quantitative research in order to enhance understandings of African American literary history. The exhibit is an extension of the Project on the History of Black Writing (HBW), which includes 100 African American novels from HBW's collection. Over six dozen factors related to publication dates, publisher regions, author information, settings, and protagonist demographics were gathered and correlated as a way of identifying notable trends in the publishing history of black novels.

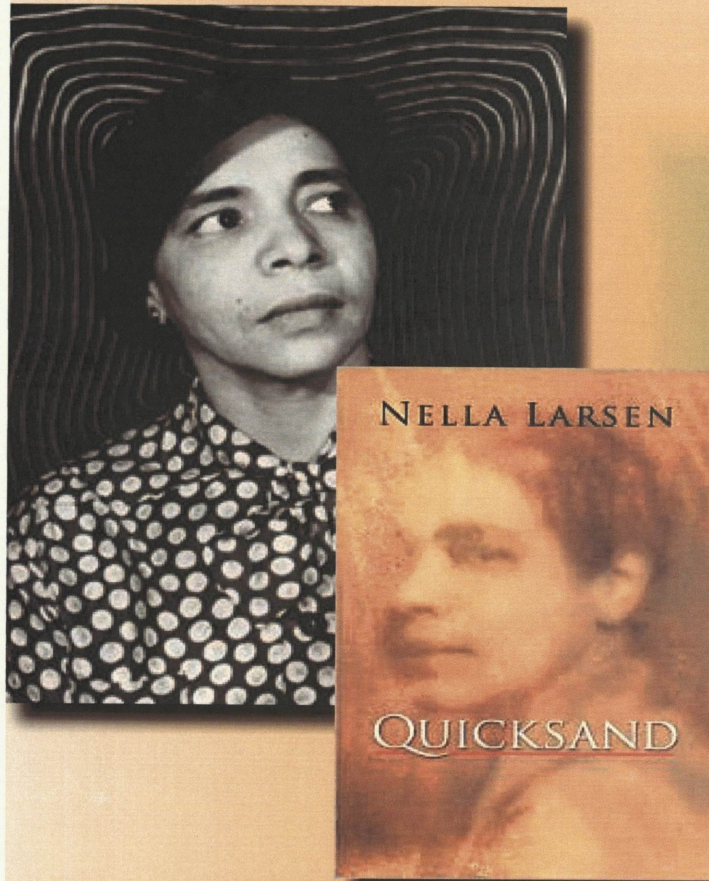
The main goals of this project are to shed new light on the holdings in HBW's novel collection and stimulate more conversations about what we can learn by studying a large number of black artistic compositions produced over 150 years. This particular exhibit focuses on 23 novels that take place in New York City or have major scenes in New York. A closer look at these novels and authors and their relationships to each other reveals useful ideas about literary history.

HBW

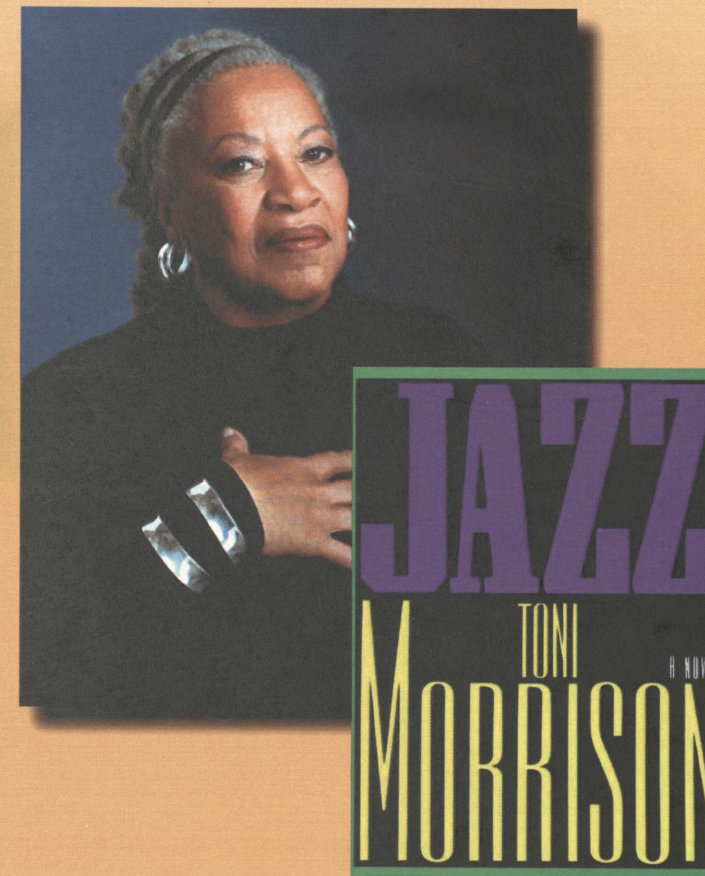
The Project on the History of Black Writing



Author Migration Patterns



Picture Left: Nella Larsen was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1891. After she married Elmer Imes, the second black person to earn a Ph.D. in physics, in 1919, she moved to Harlem where she worked as a librarian at the 135th Street branch of the NYC Public Library. In that same year, she began to write and published her first pieces in 1920.

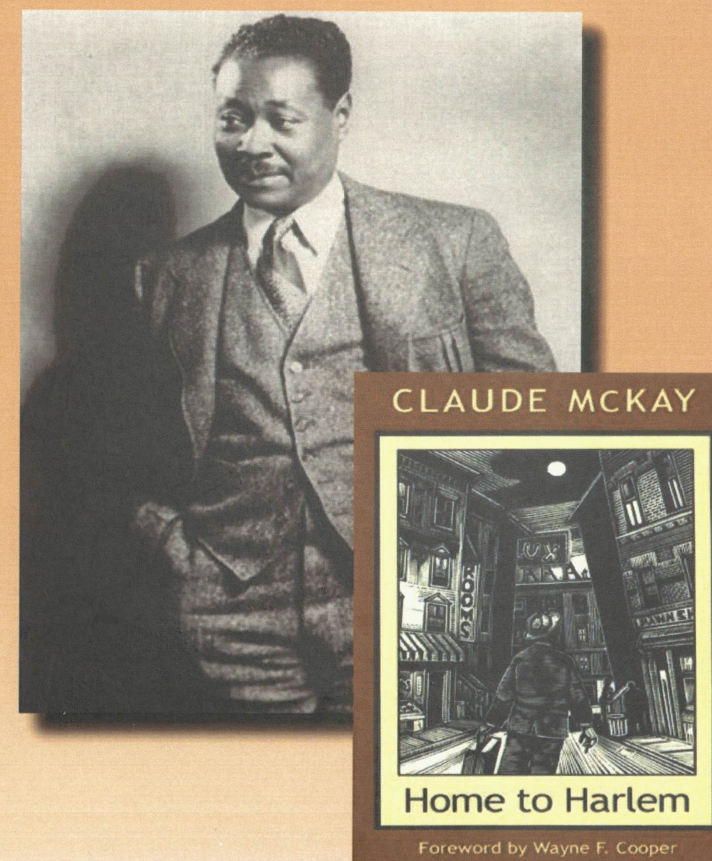


Picture Left: Born in 1931, Toni Morrison moved to New York City in 1966 to work as a editor for the New York City headquarters of Random House Publishing. As an editor, Morrison played a vital role in bringing black literature into the mainstream, editing books by authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones.

Novels By the Numbers

Out of 21 Novelists:

- 5 were born in NYC
- 15 were residing in NYC when their novel was published
- 19 called NYC a permanent residence for at least 5 years



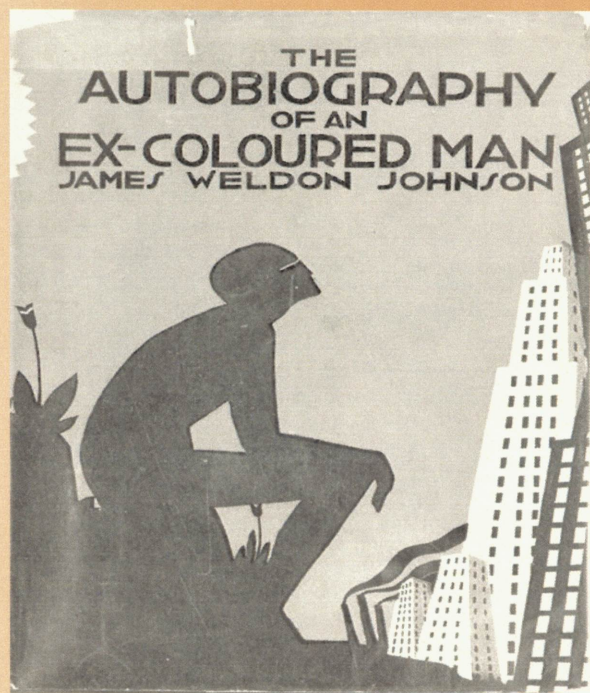
Picture Left: Claude McKay was born in Clarendon, Jamaica in 1889. In 1914, he moved to New York where he would become a prolific writer of the Harlem Renaissance and contributor *The Liberator*—a monthly socialist magazine where he first published his famed poem “If We Must Die” in 1919.

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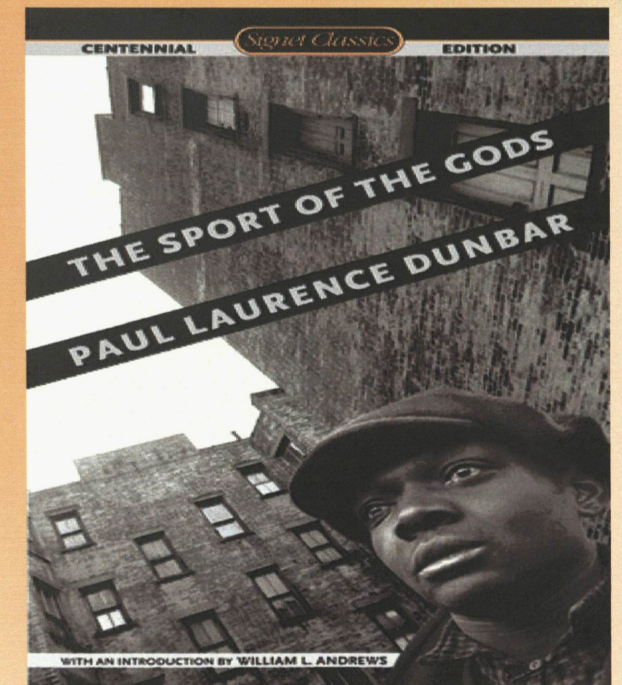
The Journal on the History of Black Writing

Character Migrations to NYC

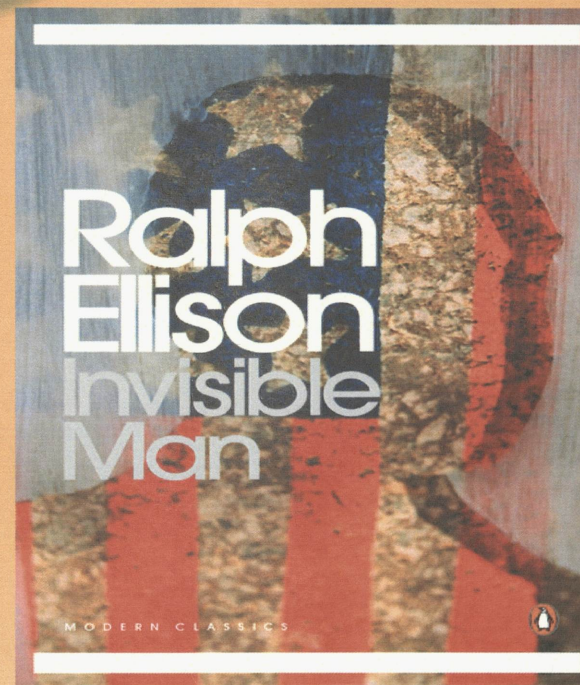
James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) focuses on the trials of an unnamed, biracial narrator coming to grips with the tough racial realities in America. From his time as a child in a small Georgia town at the beginning of the novel to his decision to live as a white man in New York at the story's end, readers come to grips with the tense social negotiations that are associated with skin tone, social status, and the larger legacy of slavery.



Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) focuses on the fictional accounts of the Hamilton family, a wealthy African American family, as they fall from social graces. Beginning in an unnamed Southern town as a very prosperous family and ending in New York City amongst scandal and prison, Dunbar creates a story about the numerous challenges, opportunities, and drawbacks about urban living.



Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) deals with the educational and intellectual development of the unnamed protagonist. His travels from a small, college town in Alabama (largely inspired by Ellison's experiences at Tuskegee) to New York bring the narrator face-to-face with the communist-like group the "Brotherhood and its chief rival Ras the Exhorter

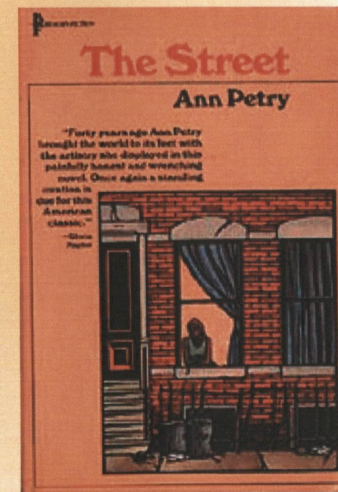
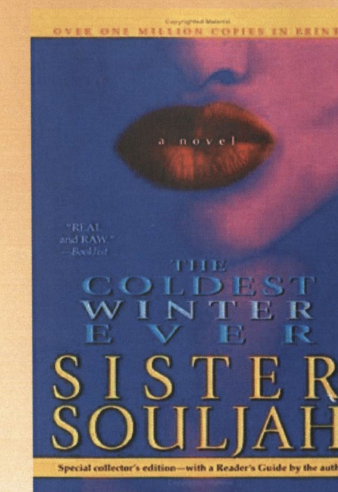
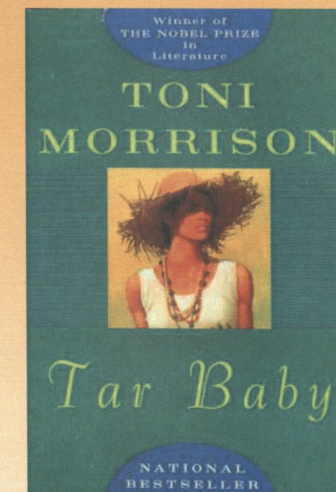
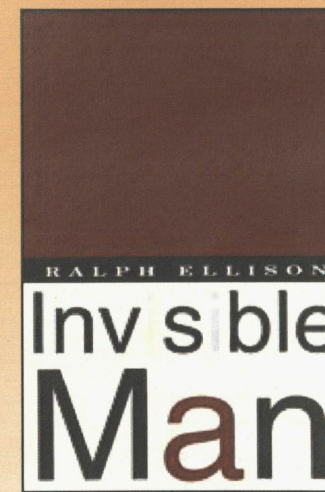
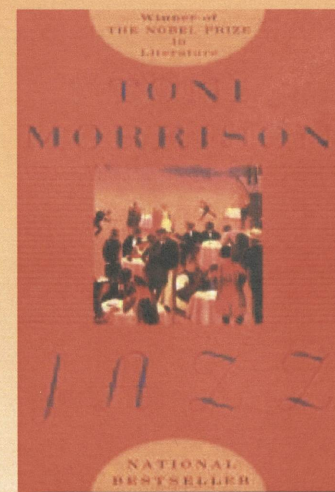
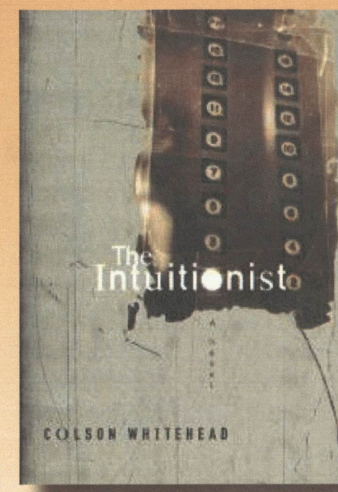
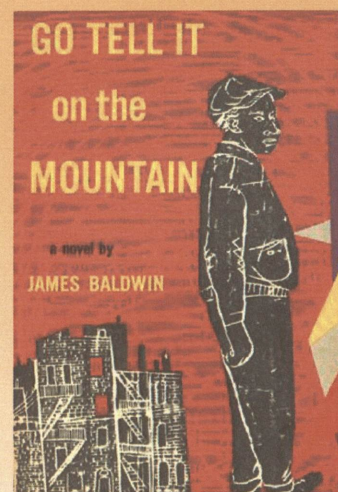
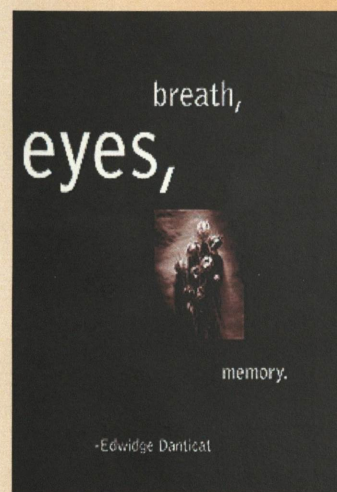
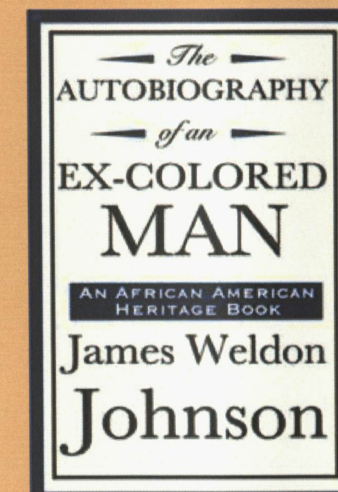
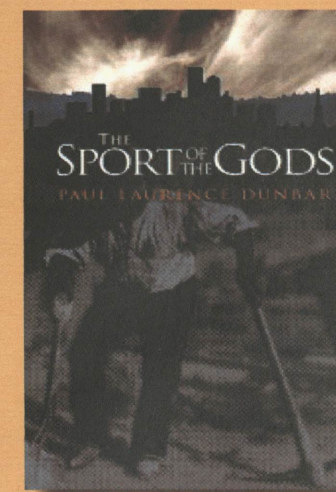
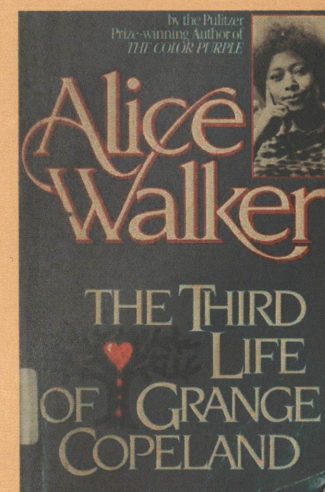
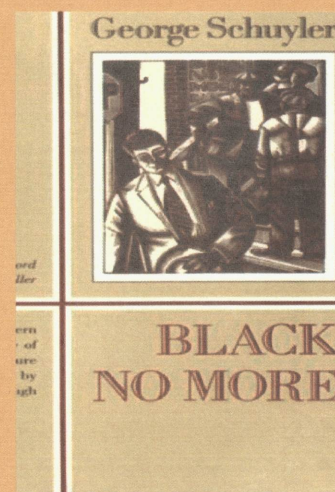
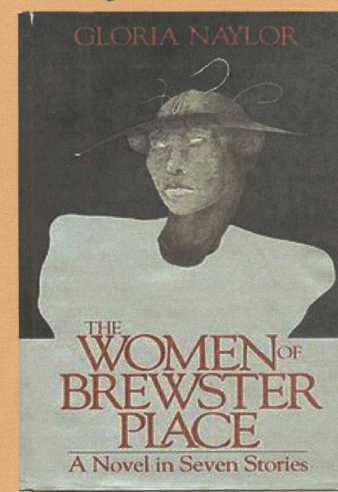
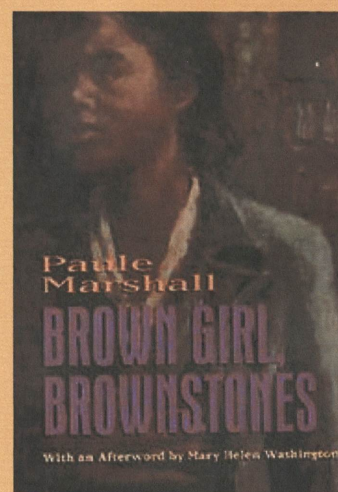


Publishing Houses and Black Writers

Novels By the Numbers Out of 23 Novels:

- Knopf and Random House published 12
- 21 of the publishing houses are located in NYC
- 14 are still in print
- 14 were published after 1950

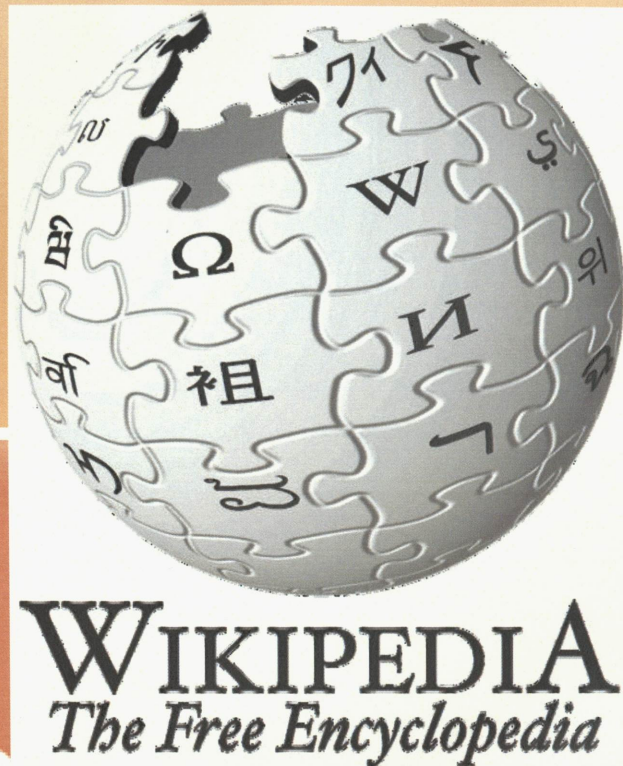
Covers of Books That Are Still In Print And Mass-Market Distribution As Of 2011



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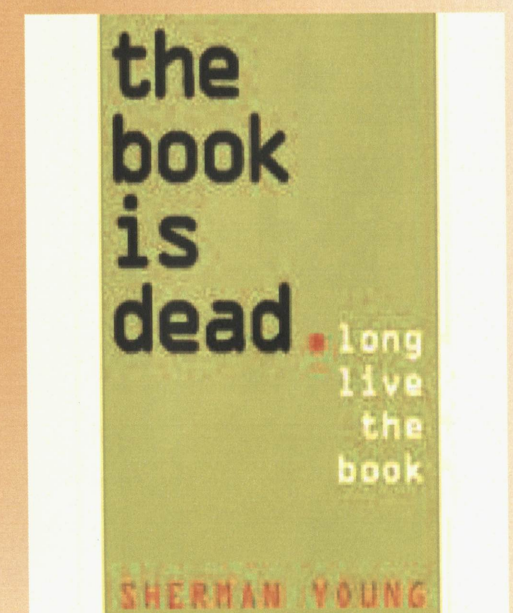
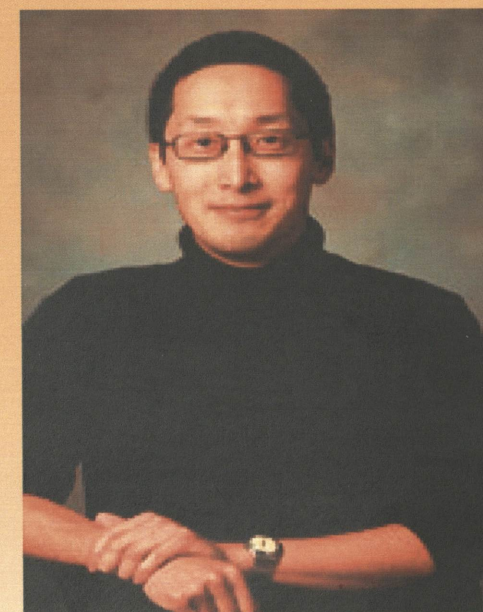
The Pioneer in the History of Black Writing

New Media and the Impact on Publishing



Sherman Young's *The Book Is Dead* (2007) examines the role that new media has played in the slow death of books as we know them. Young's book attempts to further the conversation about the future of books. Book culture is dead, he argues; it is doomed by being tied to the printed object and the economics that surround it. If we do not embrace the new media technologies of eBooks/kindles and electronic distribution, book culture will not survive.

Sherman Young, Author of
The Book Is Dead



Novels By the Numbers Out of 23 Novels:

- 13 Have Wikipedia Novel Pages
- 20 Have Wikipedia Author Pages
- 20 Novelists have Facebook Fan Pages
- 12 Have Twitter Fan Profiles

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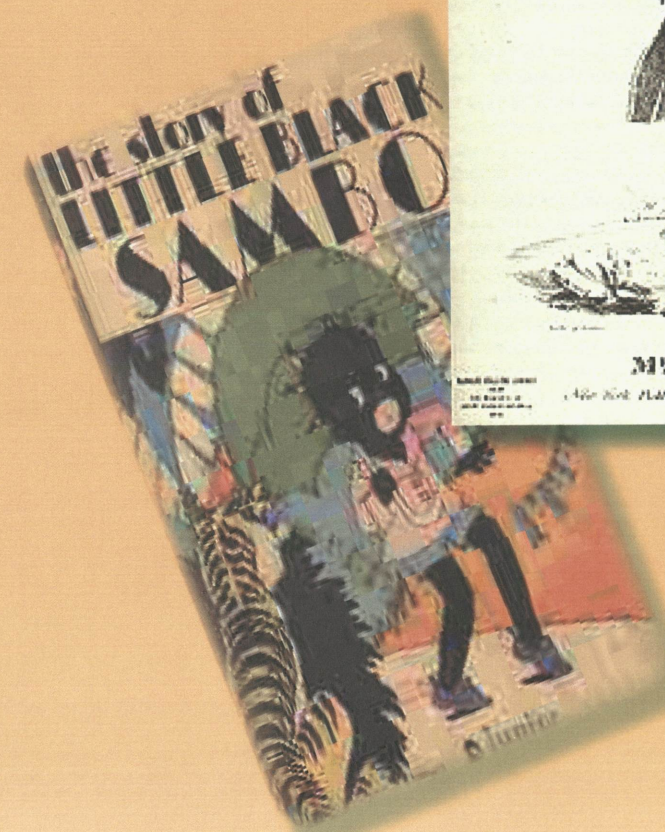
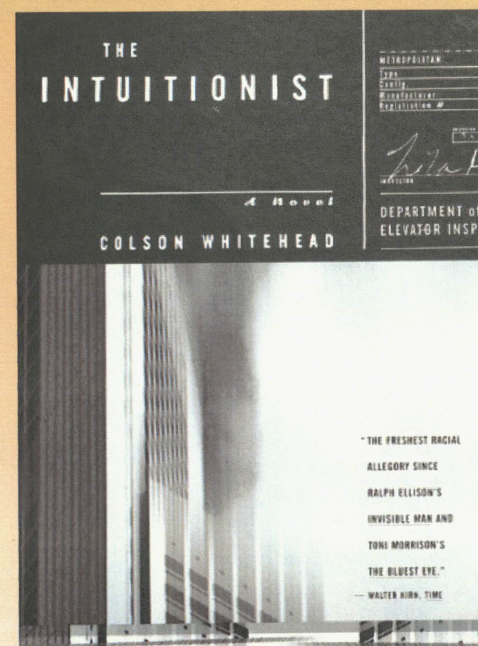
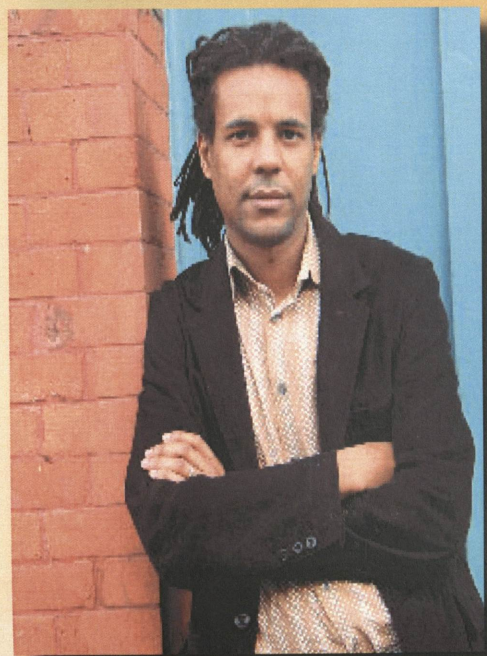
The Project on the History of Black Writing

Figures In African American Literature: The Trickster

Excerpt from Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999)

Secondary Character, Pompey explains his decision to take a bribe:

"Yeah, I hear you. You got two kids. And you shuffle for those white people like a slave. What I done, I done because I had no other choice. This is a white man's world. They make the rules. . . . I was the first one in the Department. I was the first colored elevator inspector in history. In history! . . . All my life I wanted to be an elevator inspector. That's all I wanted to be. And I got it. I was the first colored man to get a Department badge. They made shit of what I wanted and made me eat it." (195).

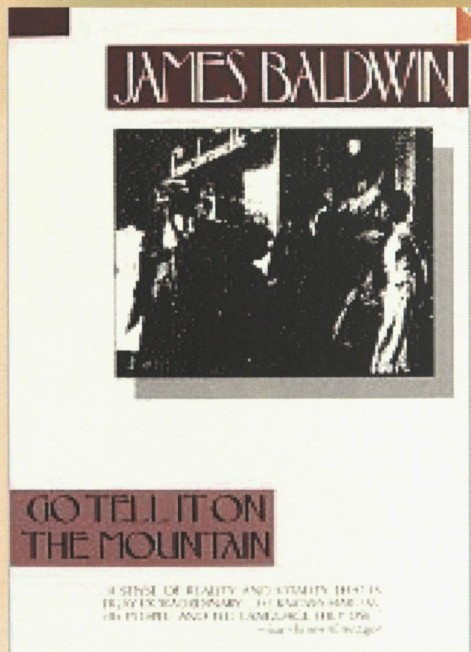


Figures In African American Literature: The Preacher

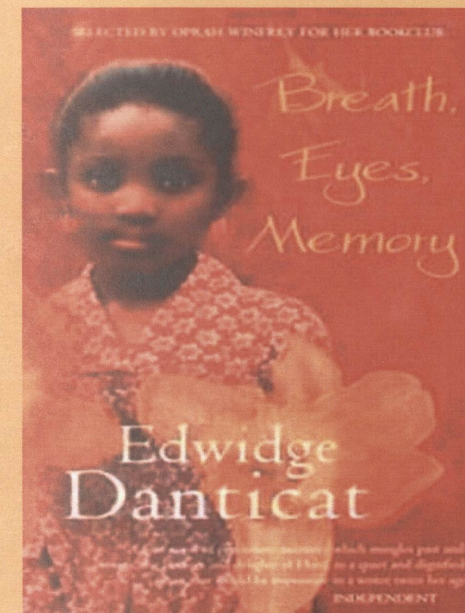
Excerpt from James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952)

Church Preacher Exposes Relationship of teen lovers Elisha and Ella Mae to the congregation:

"It was not an easy thing, said Father James, to be pastor of the flock. It might look easy to just sit up there in the pulpit night after night, year in, year out, but let them remember the awful responsibility placed on his shoulders by almighty God—let them remember that God would ask an accounting of him one day for every soul in his flock. Let them remember this when they thought he was hard, let them remember that the way to holiness was the hard way. There was no room in God's army for the coward heart, no crown awaiting him who put mother, or father, sister, or brother, sweetheart, or friend above God's will. Let the church cry amen to this! And they cried: "Amen! Amen!" (10).



Figures In African American Literature: The Migrant/Immigrant



Excerpt from Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)

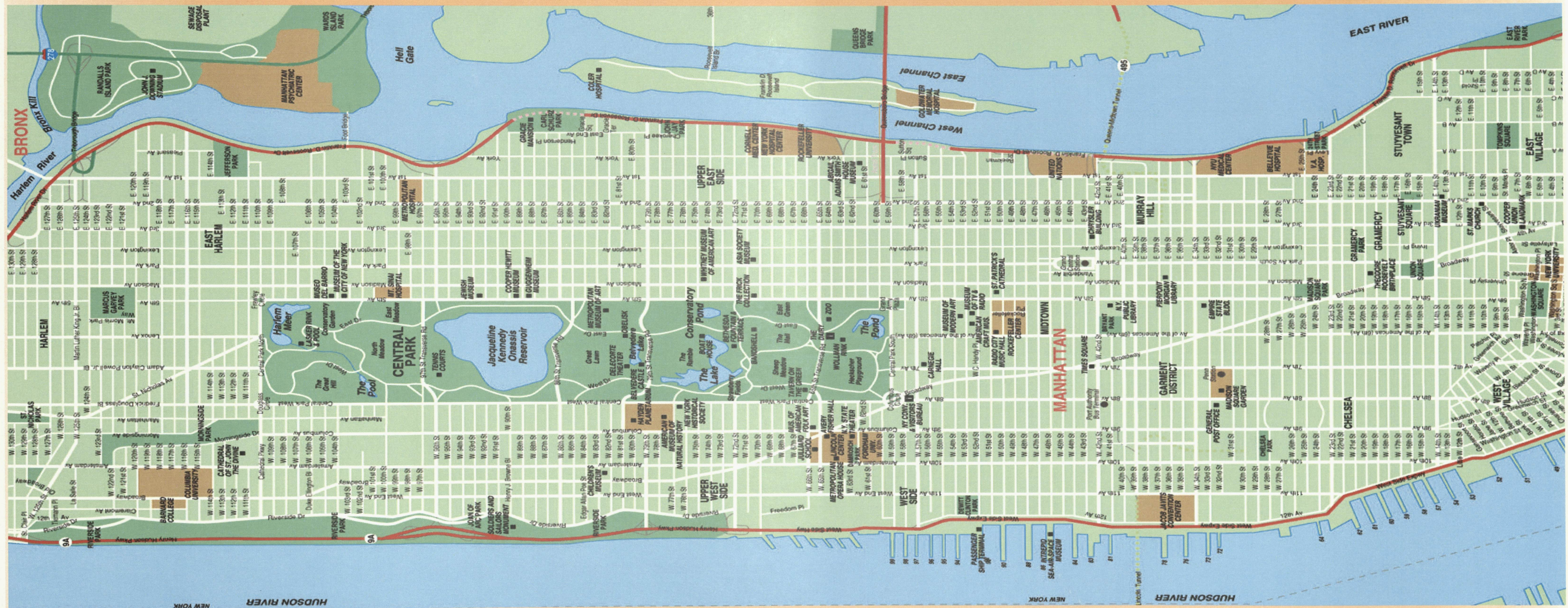
Sophie Caco's describes her first night in New York. :

"The sun stung my eyes as it came through the curtains. I slid my hand out of hers to go to the bathroom. The grey linoleum felt surprisingly warm under my feet. I looked at my red eyes in the mirror while splashing cold water over my face. New eyes seemed to be looking back at me. A new face all together. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane. Welcome to New York, this face seemed to be saying. Accept your new life. I greeted the challenge, like one greets a new day. As my mother's daughter and Tante Atie's child" (49)

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New York City Map: Concrete Jungle

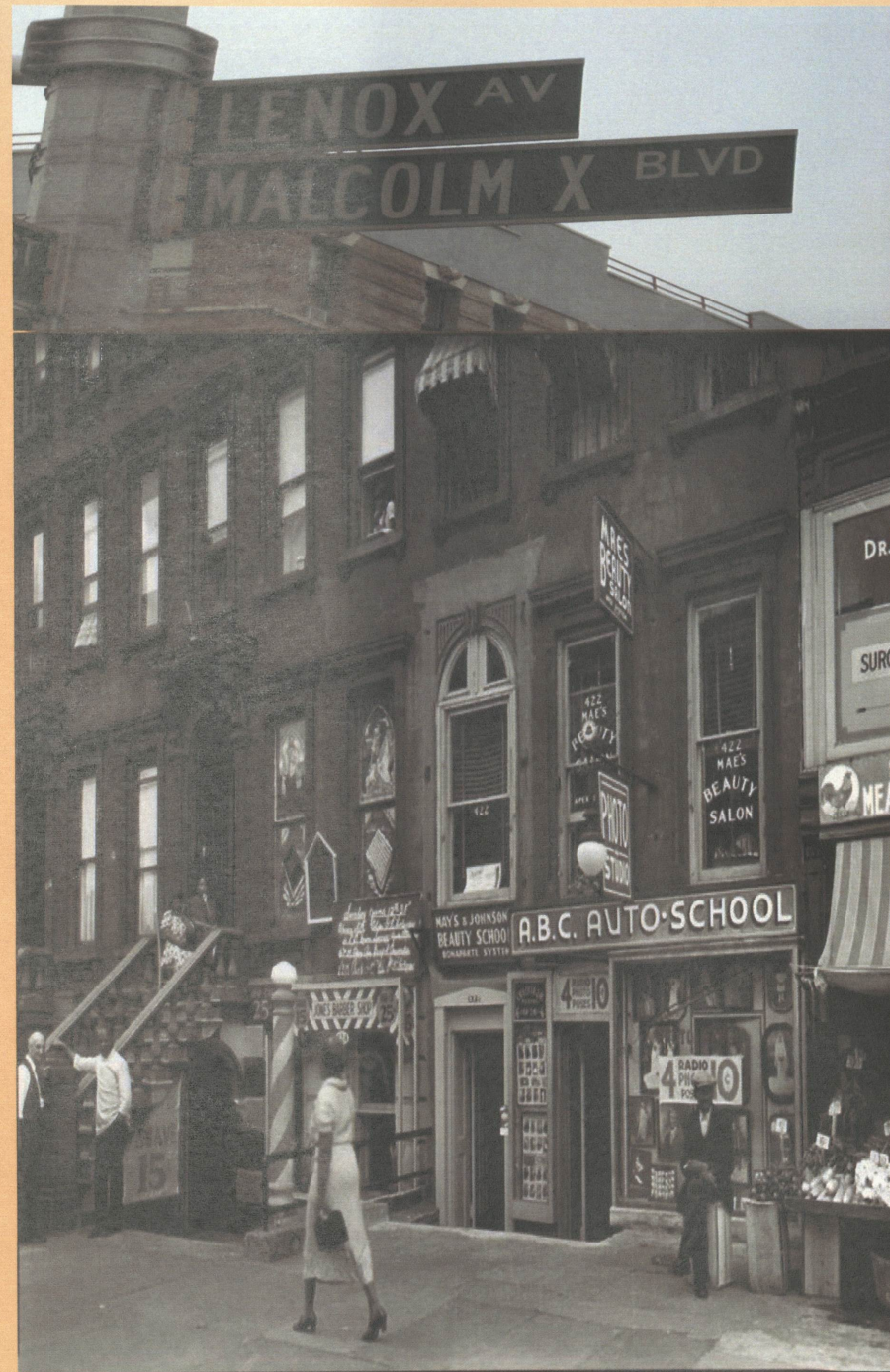


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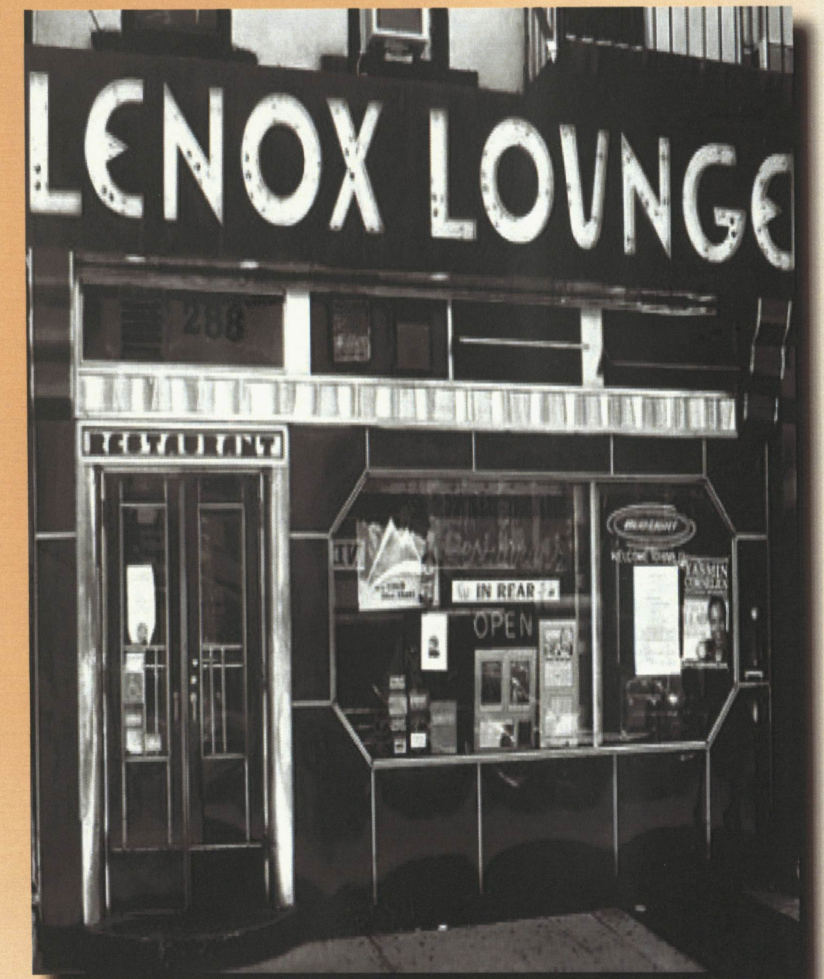
Harlem Sites

(Below) The *Harlem YMCA* on West 135th Street is a significant landmark of black culture in New York City. It opened in 1933 intended primarily for the use of African-American men, and was at the time one of the best equipped YMCAs in the United States. Many notable black Americans have stayed at the facility, including Malcolm X. Inside, the building boasts a mural by Aaron Douglas titled "Evolution of Negro Dance."



(Above) *Lenox Avenue* (Malcolm X Boulevard) is the primary north-south route through Harlem in the upper portion of the New York City borough of Manhattan. It is also considered the heartbeat of Harlem by Langston Hughes in his poem "Juke Box Love Song." In "The Fire Next Time", two essays written by civil rights leader James Baldwin, (previously published in *The New Yorker*), Lenox Avenue is simply referred to as 'The Avenue'. It is thus represented as symbol of the darkness of Harlem

(Below) *Lenox Lounge* is a long-standing bar in Harlem, New York City. It is located in Lenox Avenue, between 124th and 125th. The bar was founded in 1939 and served as venue for performances by many great jazz artists, including Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. Harlem Renaissance writers James Baldwin and Langston Hughes were both patrons, as was Malcolm X.

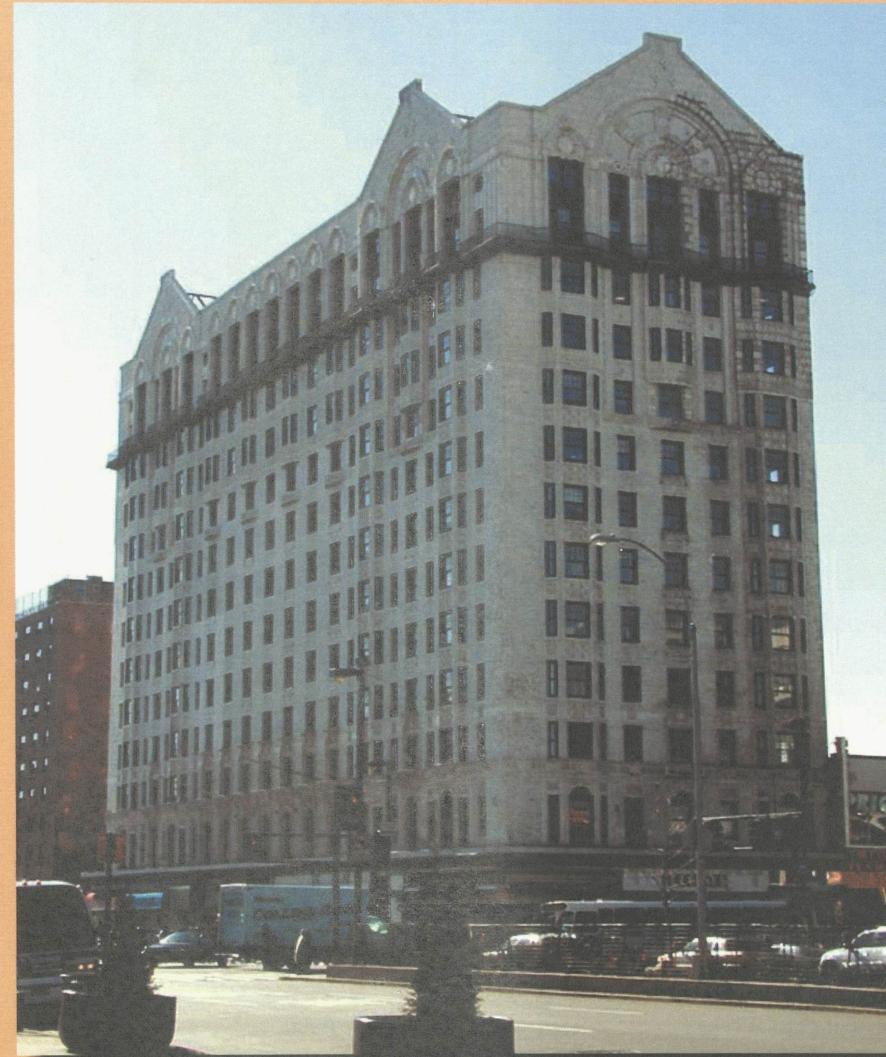
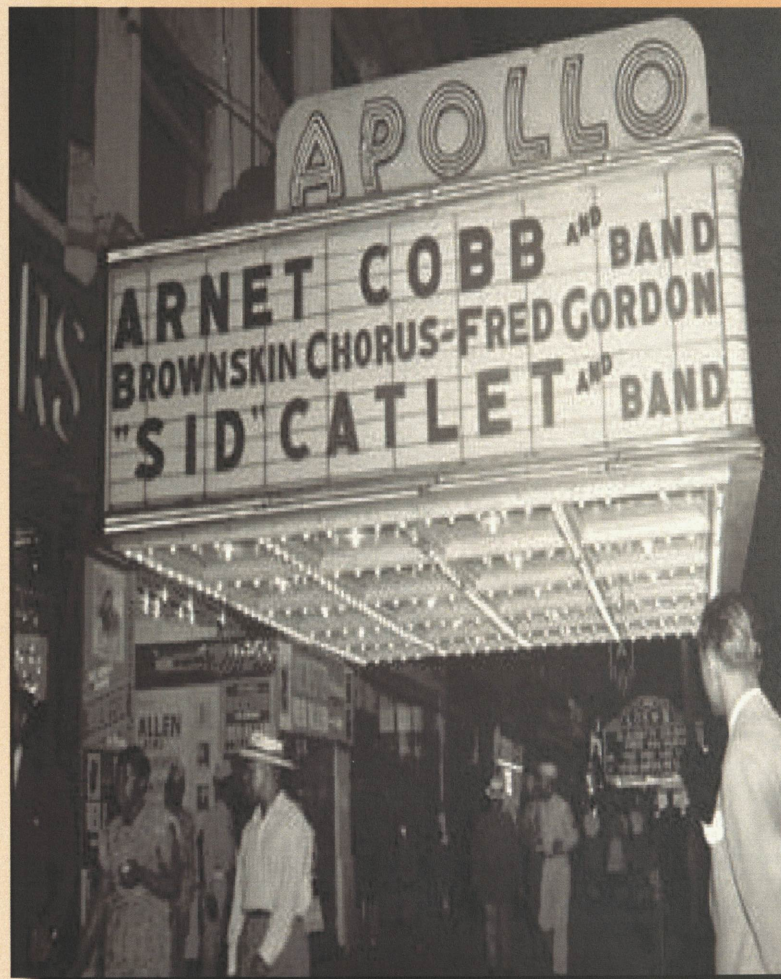


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Harlem Sites

(Below) The *Apollo Theater* in New York City is one of the most famous music halls in the United States, and the most famous club associated almost exclusively with Black performers. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and was the home of *Showtime at the Apollo*, a nationally syndicated television variety show consisting of new talent.



(Above) The *Hotel Theresa* was a vibrant center of black life in Harlem, New York City, in the mid-20th century. The hotel profited from the refusal of prestigious hotels elsewhere in the city to accept black guests. As a result, black businessmen, performers, and athletes were thrown under the same roof. Louis Armstrong, Sugar Ray Robinson, Lena Horne, Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, Duke Ellington, Muhammad Ali, Dinah Washington, Ray Charles, Little Richard, Jimi Hendrix, Malcolm X, and Fidel Castro all stayed in the Hotel or lived there for a time.

(Below) The *Abyssinian Baptist Church* is among the most famous of the many prominent and activist churches in the Harlem section of New York City. The church was an important site for religious music in the Harlem Renaissance. It remains a center of the Harlem gospel tradition.

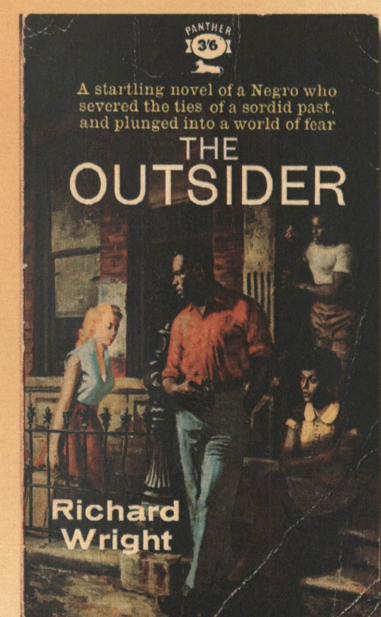
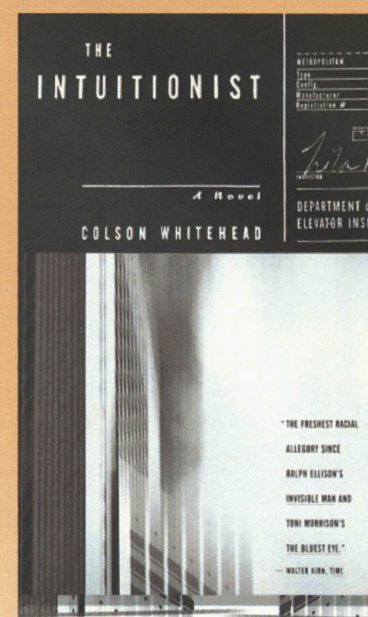
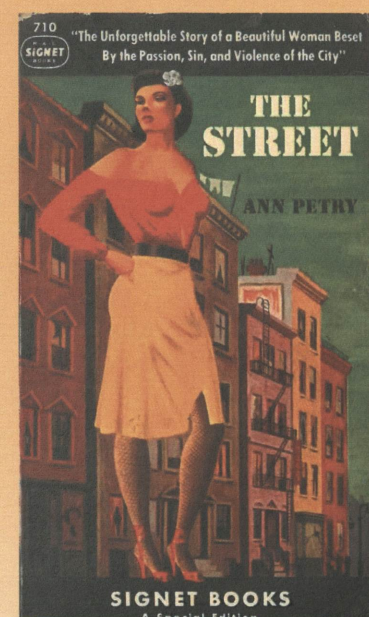
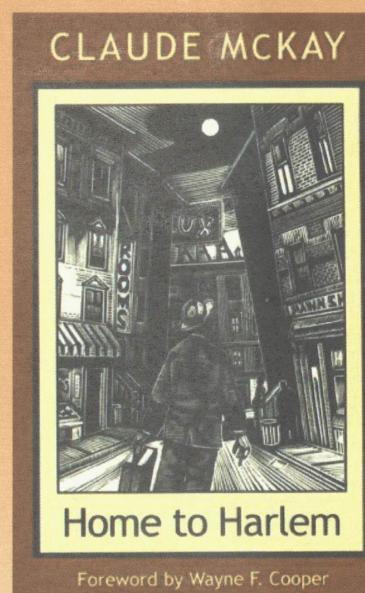
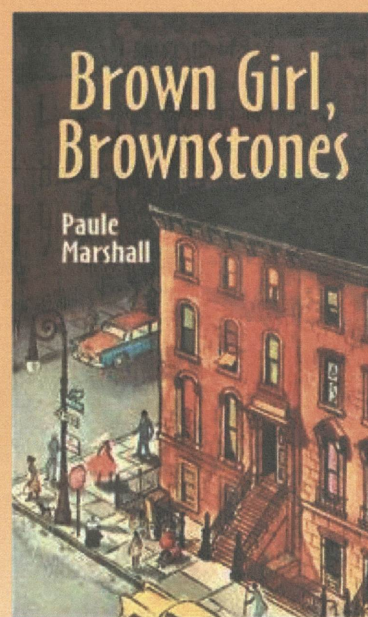
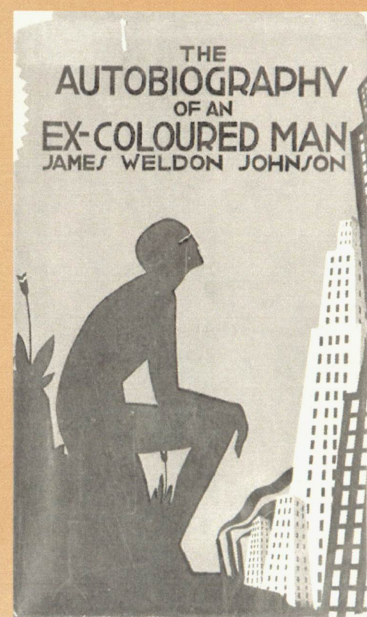
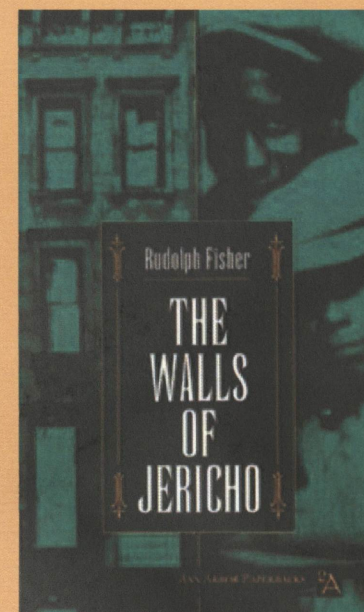
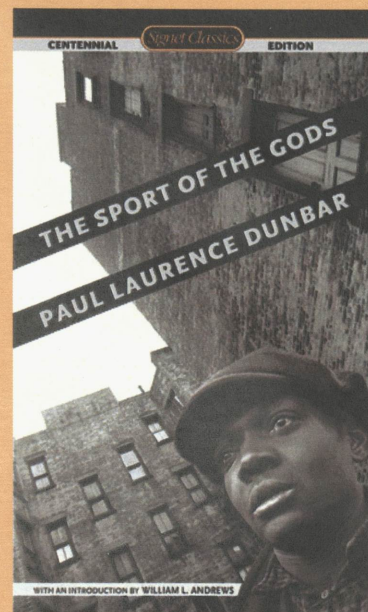
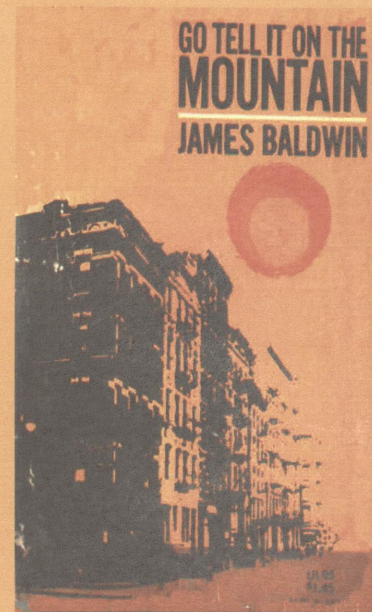


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The Pioneer in the History of Black Writing

Publishing Houses and Black Writers

Publishers often put depictions of New York on the covers of novels.

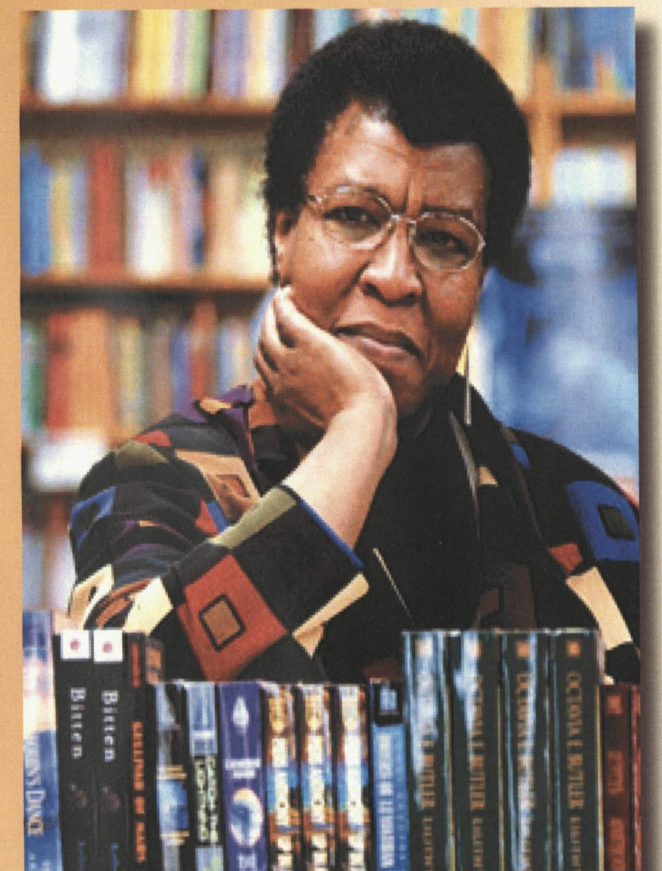
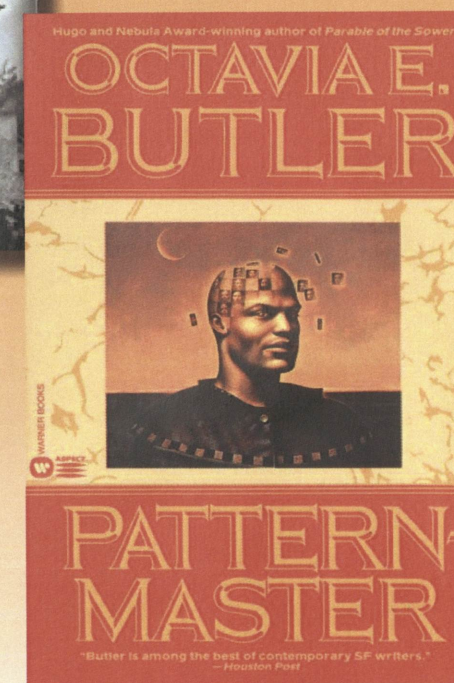
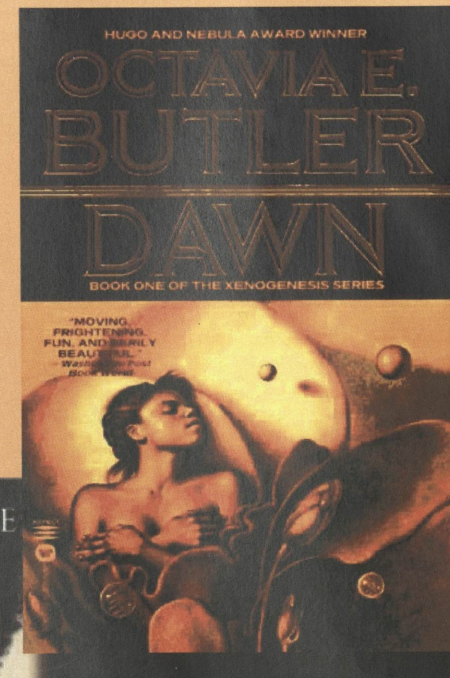
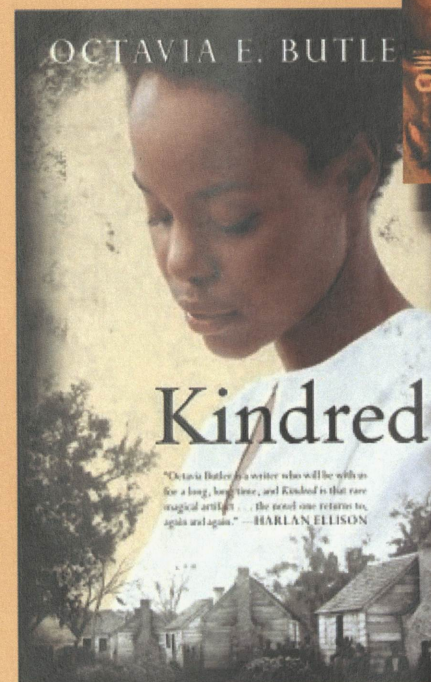


How does this shape or challenge our perceptions of New York?

The Significance of Novel Time Period



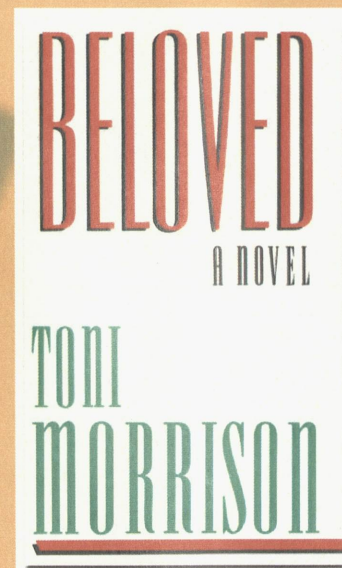
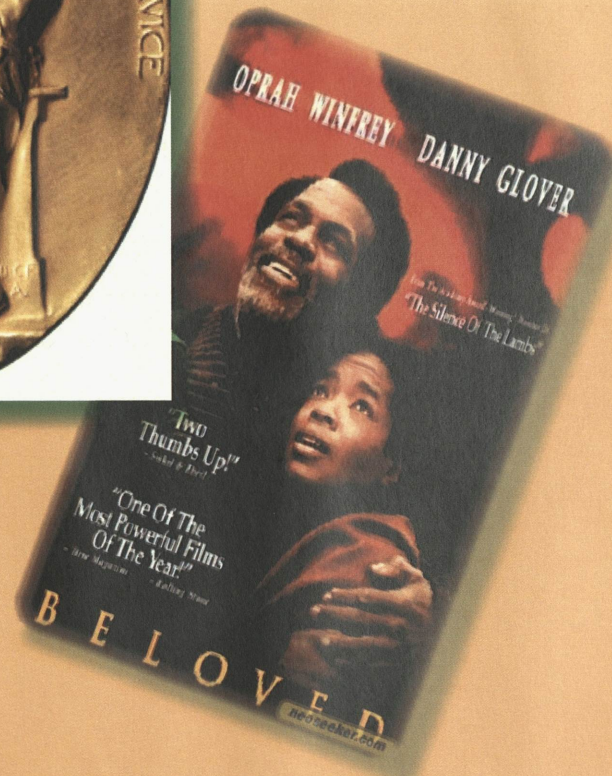
Novels, in many ways, serve as recovery projects for black culture as authors re-envision black life during slavery and various other significant moments from the distant past. The mid-nineteenth century stands out as a recurring focal point for numerous writers with several novels set in the mid-1800s or with flashbacks to the Post-Reconstruction era. Authors who have published novels in the early 1900s such as Charles Chesnutt and Oscar Micheaux as well as those who published in the second half of the Twentieth century such as Ernest Gaines and Margaret Walker offer representations of black life during the mid to late 1800s. Octavia Butler's *Patternmaster* (1976), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), however, are the only novels out of our study's 100 that depict the future.



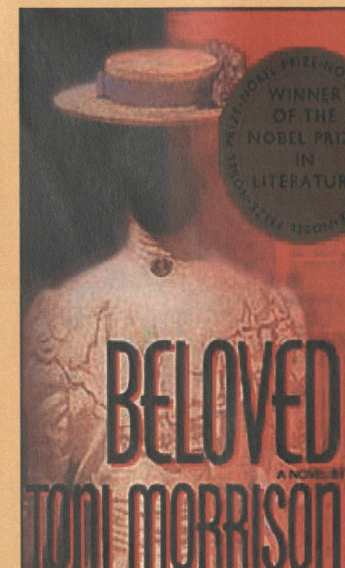
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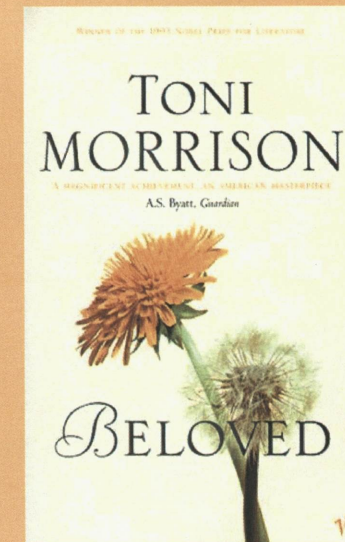
The Evolution of Novel Covers



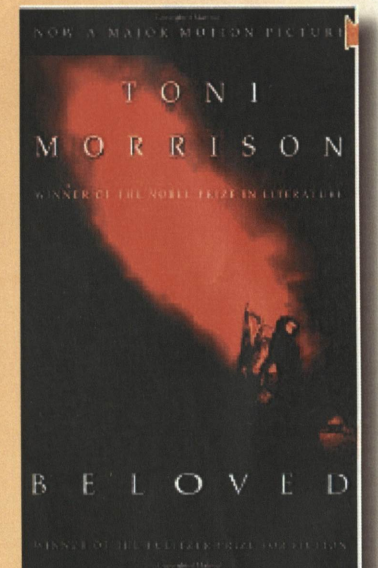
1987



1991

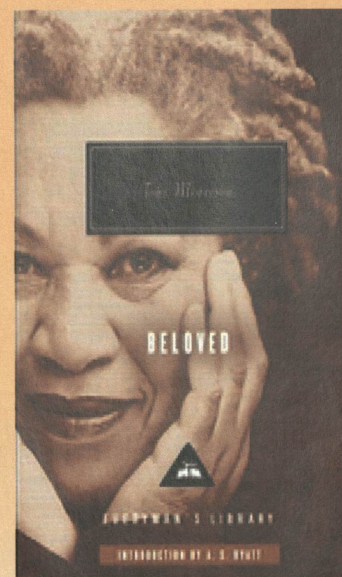


1997

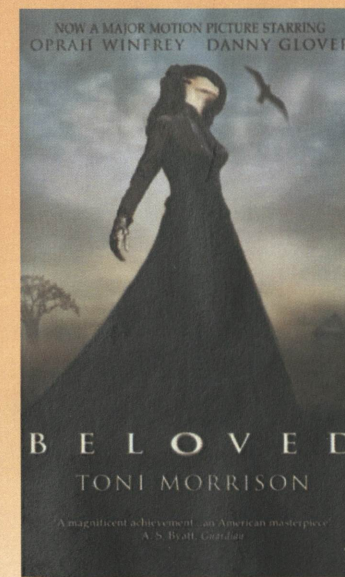


1998

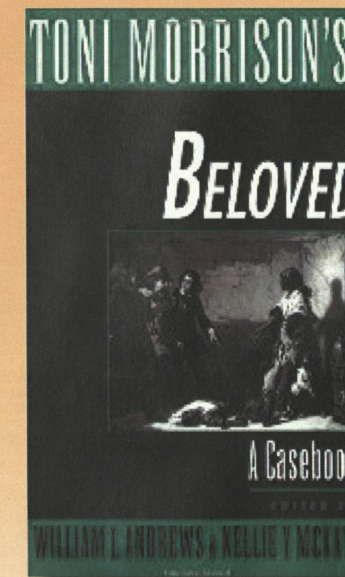
Since winning the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) has gone on to gain wide attention in both academic and pop culture circles, alike. The 1998 movie adaptation of the novel starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover has even influenced subsequent print editions, particularly, the design of the novel covers. The publishers tended to use more enticing images such as Hollywood actors and movie stills to market the book after the release of the film. Similar to *Beloved*, other novels turned into feature films tend to affect the artistic direction of book covers.



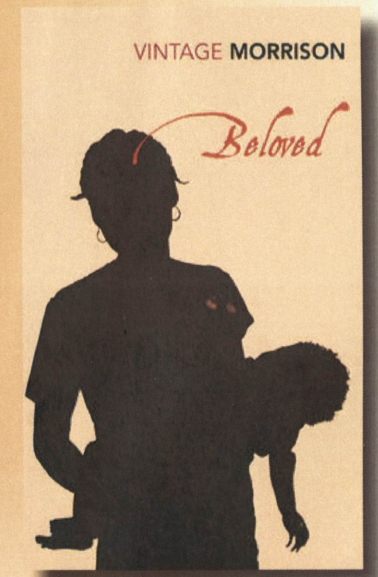
1998



1999



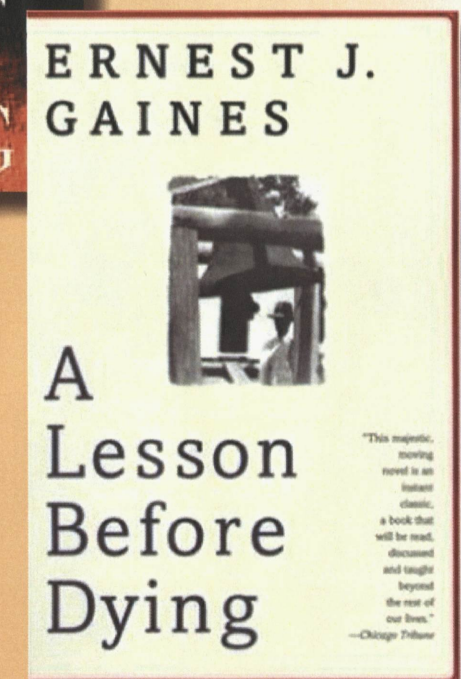
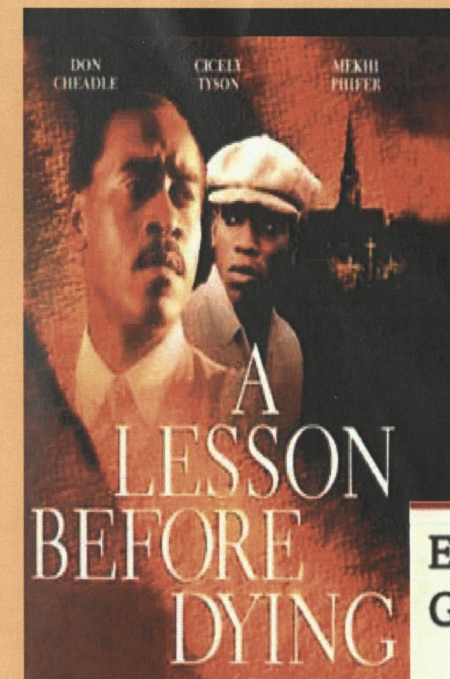
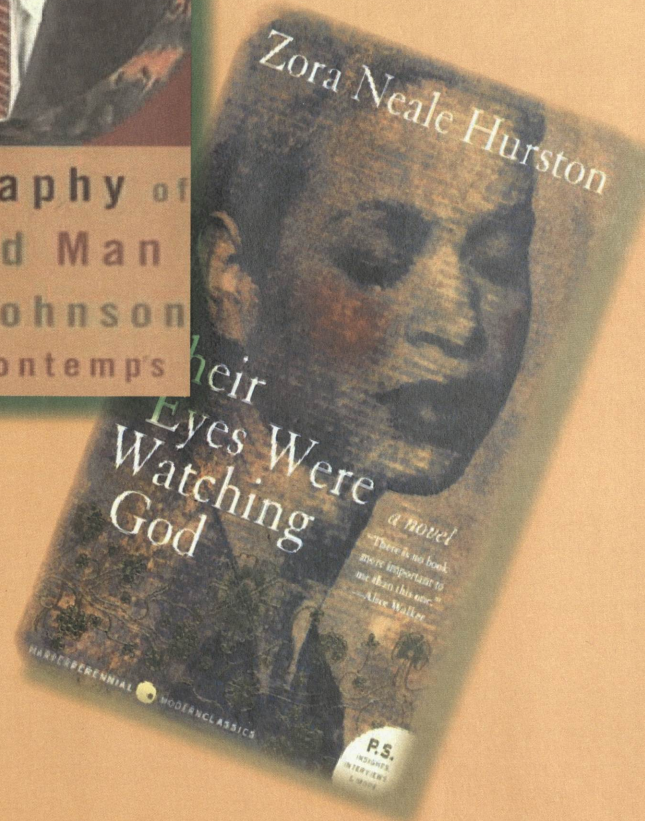
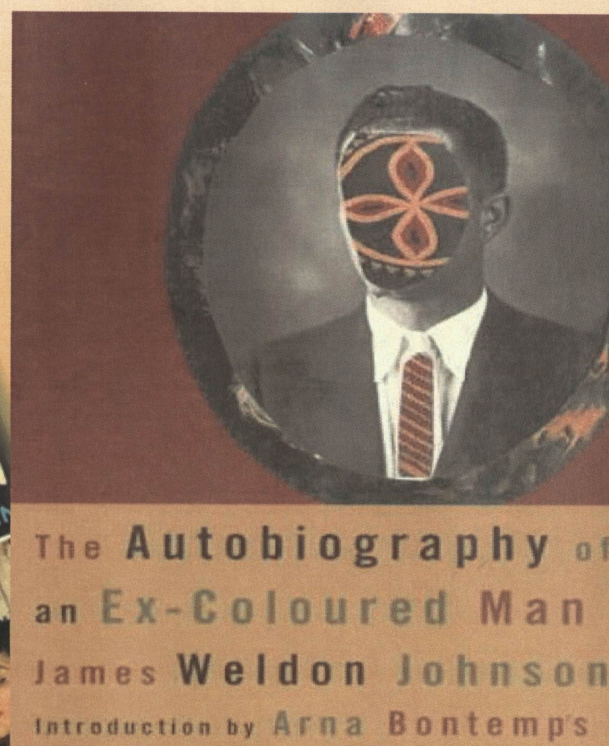
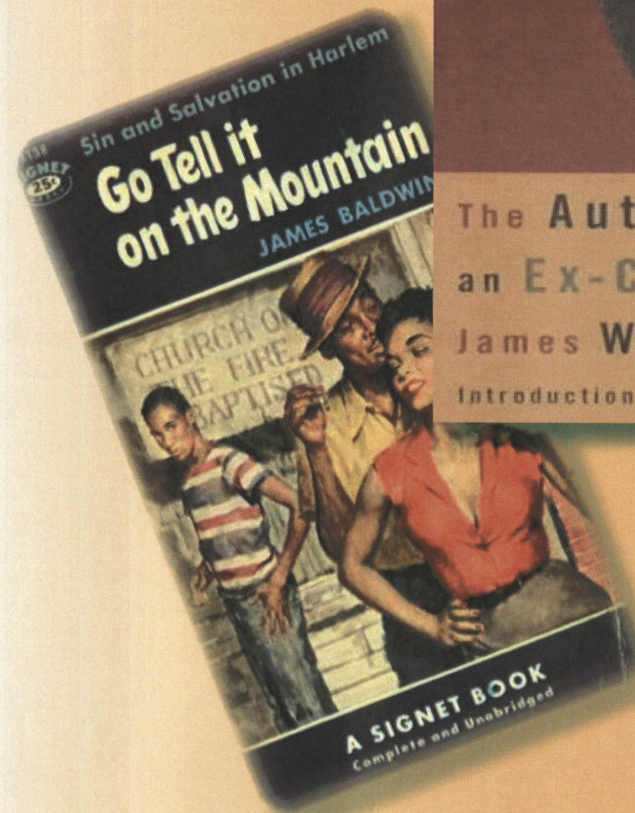
1999



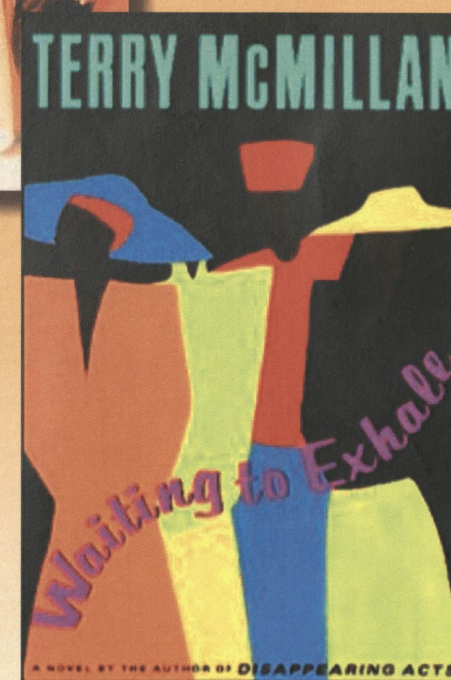
2007

Character Traits of Novel Protagonists

Contrasting novel cover representations with movie cover representations to uncover trends of protagonist characterization and marketing strategies



A cursory look at the 100 novels in our study reveal that 55% of the protagonists are women; 45% of the novels are narrated from first person point of view, and 56% of the protagonists reside in northern cities. Large numbers of male protagonists make treks to northern cities such as characters in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Langston Hughes *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). The majority of novels that take place in present-day settings typically features female protagonists; only 12% of the novels set in the 1990s up to present day feature male protagonists.

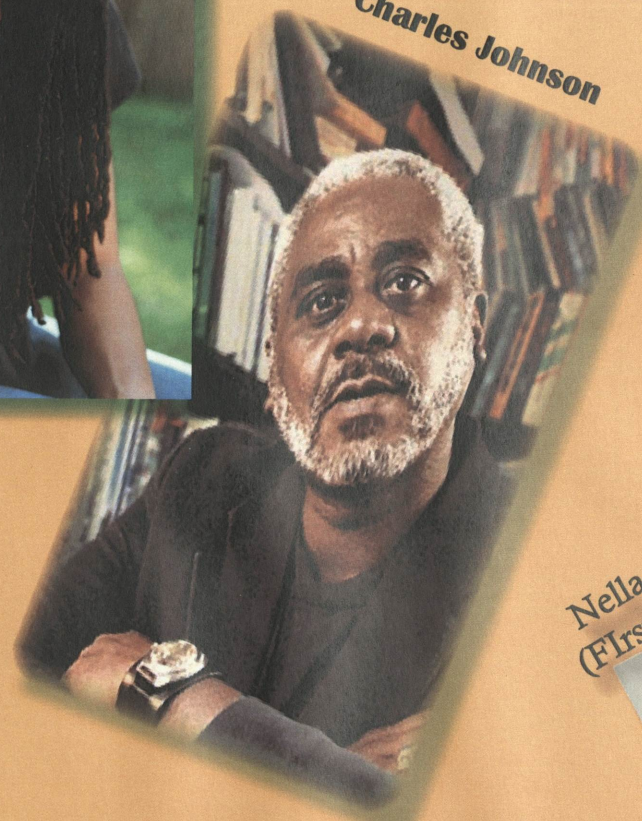


The Growing Importance of Authors Awarded Fellowships

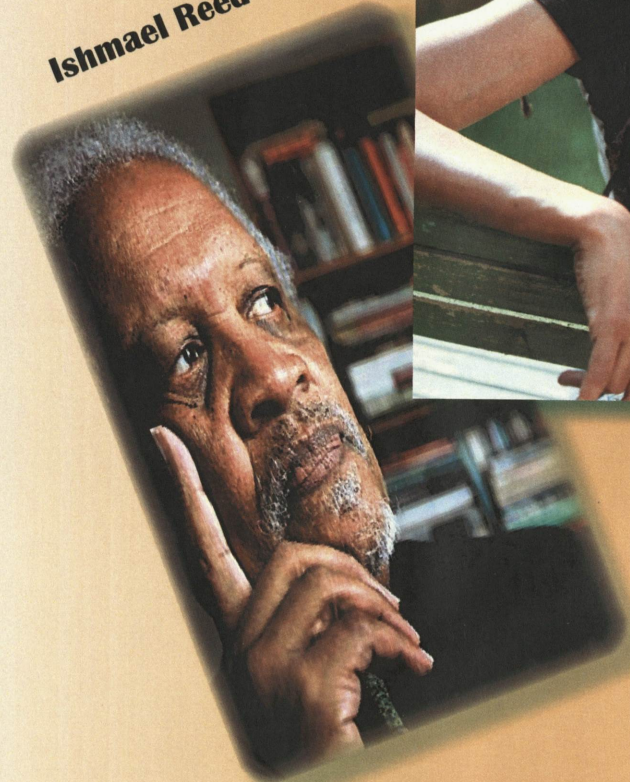
Suzan-Lori Parks



Charles Johnson



Ishmael Reed

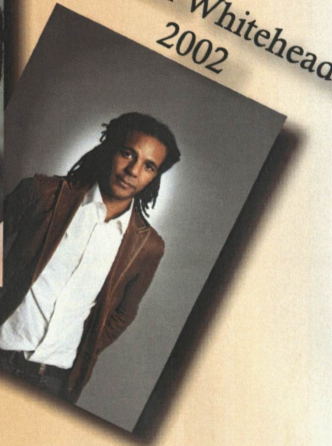


Right: Past MacArthur Foundation Awardees

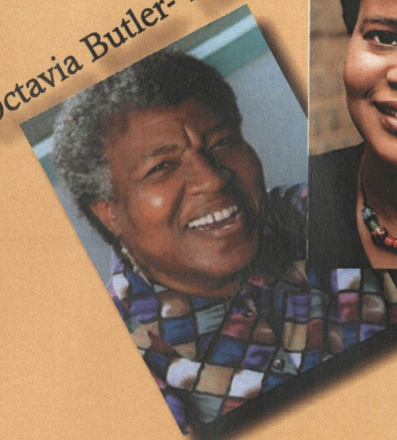
Edwidge Danticat- 2009



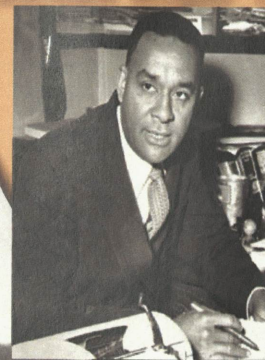
Colson Whitehead- 2002



Octavia Butler- 1995



Richard Wright- 1939



Gloria Naylor- 1988

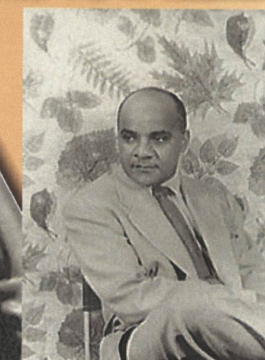


Nella Larsen- 1930
(First Black Woman)



Left: Past Guggenheim Fellowship Recipients

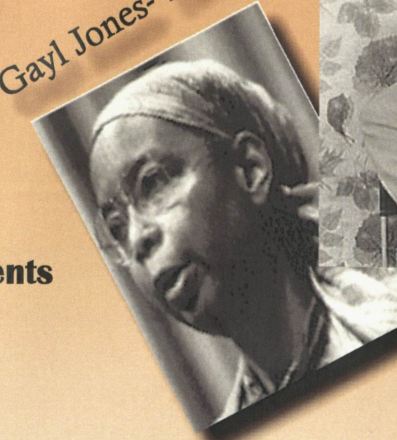
John Oliver Killens -1980



Terry McMillan- 1988



Gayl Jones- 1976



Right: Past NEA Fellowship Recipients

The organizations and agencies that have provided black writers with fellowships and other financial support stand out as a point of interest in the publishing history of African American novels over the last 157 years. The Guggenheim Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) have been consistent sources of support for large numbers of critically acclaimed African American novelists. Approximately 54% out of the 63 novelists in our study have received a fellowship of some kind—seven have received the MacArthur Foundation award, thirteen have received a Guggenheim, and eleven have received NEA awards. For instance, Ishmael Reed author of *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) received both a Guggenheim and an NEA award, Charles Johnson author of *Middle Passage* (1990) received MacArthur and Guggenheim awards, and Suzan-Lori Parks author of *Getting Mother's Body* (2003) received Guggenheim, MacArthur, and NEA awards.

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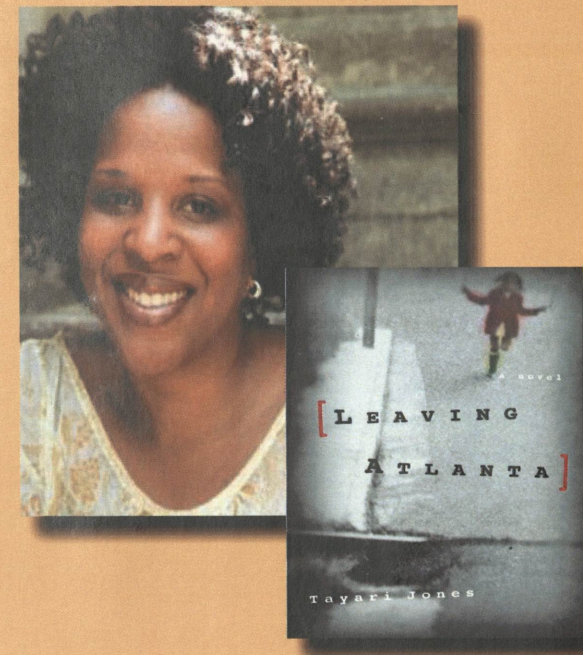
The Project on the History of Black Writing

The Growing Importance of Formal Education



Every living author in our study that has published a novel since 1980 has completed a college degree of some sort. The likelihood that authors of major African American novels published prior to 1980 had attended college was less likely. Notably, over half of the novelists who published books after 1980 received advanced graduate degrees. For instance, Percival Everett, author of *Erasure* (2001) received a B.A. from the University of Miami and a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) from Brown University in 1982. Tayari Jones, author of *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) received a B.A. from Spelman College and an MFA from Arizona State University in 2000. And, Paul Beatty, author of *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) received a B.A. from Boston University and an MFA from Brooklyn College in 1989.

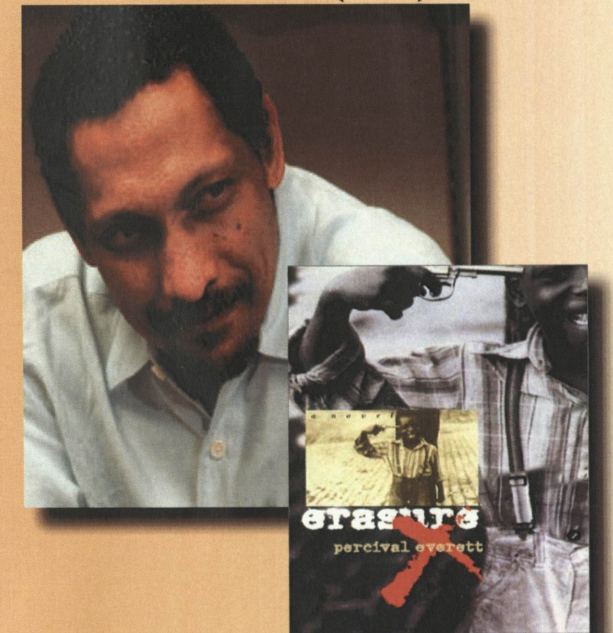
Below: Tayari Jones,
author of *Leaving Atlanta* (2002)



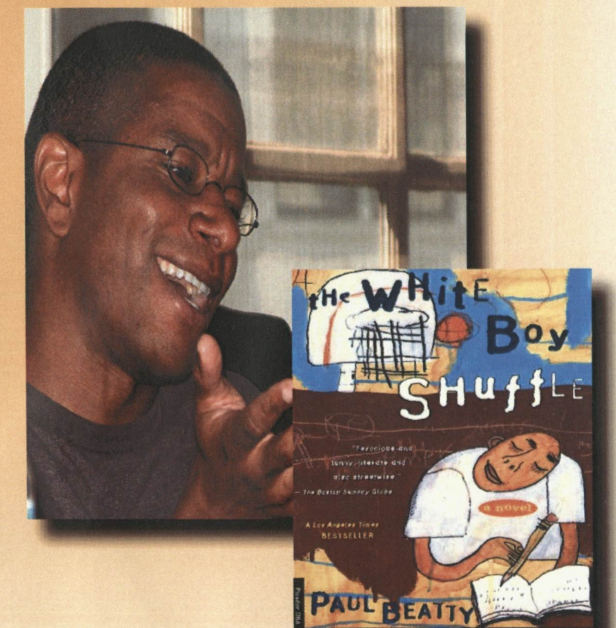
Out of 63 authors:

- 100% that have published a novel after 1980, have received some type of college education.
- 63% have a college degree;
- 11% have an MFA;
- 27% hold a graduate degree of some sort;

Below: Percival Everett,
author of *Erasure* (2001)



Below: Paul Beatty, author of
The White Boy Shuffle (1996)



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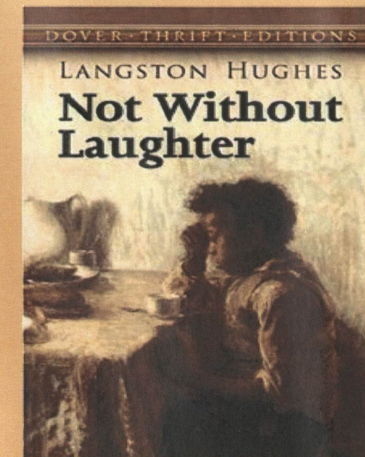
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The prominence NYC, Chicago, and California



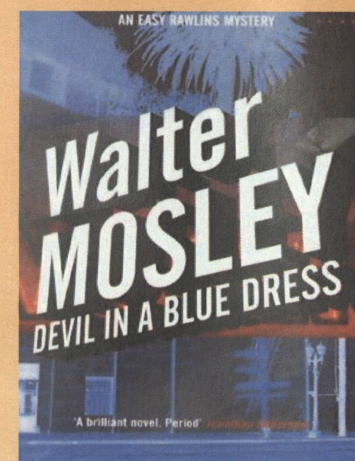
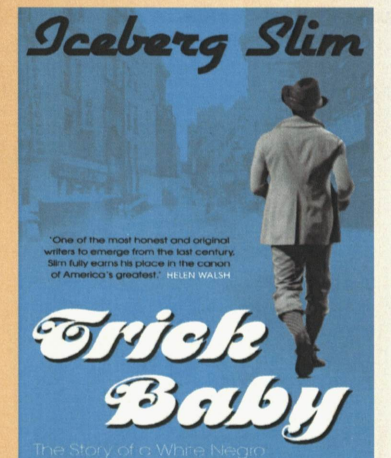
Given the larger history of slavery in America, the South has always figured prominently into the geographic settings of African American literature since the publication of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* in 1853. However, the results of our study reveal that there has been a tendency among novelists to set their narratives in urban spaces, especially New York City and Chicago. Notably, various locations throughout California also appear to be regular points of interest, as Los Angeles and San Francisco appear in novels by Walter Mosley, Octavia Butler, and Terry McMillan.

Right: Novels that feature settings in Chicago, Illinois



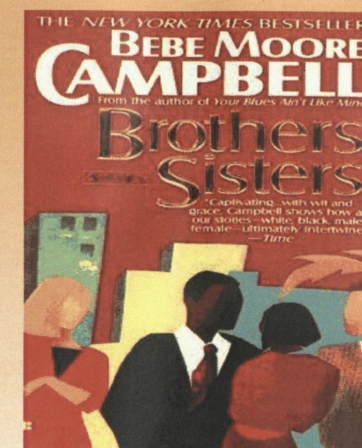
Left: *Not Without Laughter* (1930) by Langston Hughes

Right: *Iceberg Slim* by *Trick Baby* (1967)



Left: *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) by Walter Mosley

Right: *Brothers and Sisters* (1994) by Bebe Moore Campbell



Left: Novels that feature settings in Los Angeles, California

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The Project on the History of Black Writing